ON LOVE, FEAR AND SIN

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Abstract

Love, fear and sin are forever teaching us lessons that most of us keep on ignoring or forgetting, they show us the different facets of human nature, they make us rise and fall, moving from bliss to despair. They change the way we are, the way we perceive ourselves, the others, the world. Therefore, identity can be conceptualized in terms of love, fear and sin. In Leon Wieseltier's *Kaddish*, these three concepts of identity are dealt with from the perspective of death, of Jewish tradition related to mourning, and of the condition of the intellectual for whom identity implies, first of all, a spiritual search.

The story of *Kaddish* originates in death: Mark Wieseltier, Leon Wieseltier's father died in 1996. Not only does Leon, the son, decide to follow tradition (returning to Orthodox Jewish practice) and recite the mourner's kaddish for a year, but also to keep a journal. It is written in short paragraphs and aphoristic sentences following his study of the texts (ancient as well as modern) on the mourning ritual. Published in 1998, *Kaddish* is a contemplation of rabbinical texts, a meditation on two worlds in fact: the written text of a year of mourning, which Wieseltier turns into a year of study.

The journal reveals a son's urgent exploration of Jewish tradition which commands all children to respect their parents in death, by reciting the mourner's prayer, the kaddish, three times a day for a year. Out of love for his father, fearing the promise of blessed afterlife would not come true for his parent unless he, as a son, does his duty (although the proof that he needs cannot be found), Wieseltier returns to the tradition that, under obscure circumstances, he had abandoned. He starts praying out of LOVE and out of FEAR. He is praying for his father's SINS to be forgiven.

In dealing with the concepts of love, fear and sin, Wieseltier employs different texts, at some point in his journal referring to Nahmanides. The Middle Ages rabbi established a certain relation between death and sin, reflecting a moralistic approach to death, not a metaphysical one. This interpretation is rejected by Wieseltier, since, to him, "death is amoral, indifferent, mechanical", "neutral"(11).

"So the mourner must not think metaphysically about death, says Nahmanides. The mourner must think morally about it. Death is not terrible. Sin is terrible. […] The moralistic interpretation of death repels me." (10)

To Wieseltier, freedom and ethics are permeable concepts, as far as discourses about identity are discourses about **limits,** as well as about **freedom.**

According to Liiceanu (2007: 11-12), the first limit we "have to stand" is precisely the fact of being. It triggers the awareness of being, which, in its turn, presupposes another limit (the second one), thus conditioning, what he calls, "gravitational freedom". The third limit implies awareness of our finitude. All these three limits "circumscribe the condition of gravitational freedom as human freedom" (12).

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Liiceanu states that, in order to manifest itself, gravitational freedom has to, as the terminology suggests, hang on something which is indeed the human being (11): once a human is born, he/she is given the gravitational freedom that turns into a conditioned one. The "circle of limits" (13) within which we can speak about gravitational freedom as conditioned freedom is given by the human being, the awareness of being, our finitude, followed by sex, race, epoch, place, ascending line, caste, language, religion, all coming "before our choice" (13).

Liiceanu asserts that freedom itself, in terms of gravitational freedom, is not our choice, it is given to us before being able to choose (we cannot choose to be born or not, just the same as we cannot choose our parents, our sex, place of birth etc.) Consequently, the limits of the individual can be divided into two major groups, if analyzed from the perspective of change and freedom of choice (26-27): the immutable ones – the elements that cannot be subject to choice and change (sex, somatic and mental inheritance, ascending line, race, nation, epoch) and the mutable ones that allow subsequent choice and change (place, language, religion, name, caste).

We construct an identity of our own through our choices, through the multitude of the successive ways in which we have defined ourselves. Any decision that we make (good or bad as it is subsequently labeled) leads to the (de)construction of our identity (which would be different if the choice were different). Identity is not only something "given", a pre-established path, but it is, most of all, the path of our choices, a matter of "being" as well as of "becoming".

Unlike gravitational/original freedom, the freedom of choice implies taking a **risk,** triggering responsibility, and guilt. What is the risk taken by Leon Wieseltier, the mourning son? If he does not follow tradition, the unproven risk is that his father may not be forgiven, his sins still limiting his soul and its return to the Creator. Out of love and, to a certain extent, fear, Leon decides to return to tradition in the hope of helping his father in the afterlife.

It is choice then that triggers changes in his life: human versus divine choices, choices that one can or cannot make. His father's death is not Leon Wieseltier's choice, but God's; his is the one that he makes when he gives up tradition. And his is the one brought about by death — the return to tradition. In his attempt to understand and accept the reality of death, Leon chooses again: the choice of texts that he interprets is his. The texts will provide him knowledge, strength, now that there is a clash between reason and soul, "thoughts and tears"(Mihaies, in Wieseltier, 2001:16), a rewarding and at the same time frustrating contemplation of this textual garden seen as a shelter , a *hortus conclusus* where the limits are given in terms of time and space, both related to tradition.

In *Despre limită,* Liiceanu offers a valuable approach to **fear** seen as limiting our freedom (2007: 51-53)**.** He makes the distinction between 1. instinctual fear and 2. genuine human fear. In his view, the former refers to the fear that dominates us, it is "before us" and deep inside us; it is related to instinct and not to decision; we fear the things that can happen *to us*, the possible danger that is "known, experimented and verified as such by others" (51). Therefore, it is not the real danger, but its "projection" (51) that "terrifies and dominates" the individual, who, as a consequence of this domination, is no longer free. The latter is seen as a "component of courage" (52), resulting from the act of taking a decision (a result of the individual's choice), from the courage to do this. Fear is therefore understood in terms of courage for it may turn

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into "free fear" (53) which implies confronting and conquering one's fear, finally being understood as (an act of) *courage*.

There are three authorities the individual is responsible to and defines himself in relation to (Liiceanu, 2007: 156-162):

1. the others → fear is triggered by risk and punishment, social responsibility. Freedom is seen from the perspective of "immediate consequences" (159) and the risk is the loss of freedom and even life. The criteria of judgment in this "scenario" are known and imposed from the outside.

[the others and the individual]

2. the self (one's conscience) → freedom and responsibility are not "lived" in their "immediate consequences", fear is "postponed" as well as guilt, sentence and punishment; failure is "negotiable" → the risk is understood in terms of fulfillment or failure. The criteria of judgment come from the inside.

[the self]

3. God → freedom and responsibility are "lived in their infinite consequences". The real (present in 1 and 2) becomes unreal, we move from concrete to abstract, nothing is clearly outlined any more (the individual establishes the transition from society to God; he is a mediator, the receiver of these consequences, either immediate, or awaiting or infinite) or proved as such. → the risk relates to eternity, forgiveness or damnation; (genuine guilt is given by "falling from supreme responsibility" related to the individual's sense of freedom which allows choice).The criteria of judgment are unknown (just assumed).

[the self and God]

And all these — limits and freedom, love, fear and sin, responsibility and guilt, risk and punishment — come to determine Leon Wieseltier's choice. He does not confine himself to just reciting the prayer as he needs to understand it and feel it, so he begins his urgent exploration of the ritual in response to eschatological doubts and fears.

The prayer can help the one in grief to understand love and feel it again, to overcome his fears, to repent for his sins or ask for forgiveness for the dear ones. Still, not only the prayer is important but also the place where this prayer (that is, the kaddish) has to be recited. The shul, as Wieseltier decides to call it, brings together both his present realities: praying and investigating, born out of the need to believe that the memory of the deceased one is a blessing not only here, upon the ones that pray for him, and remember him, but also there, upon him, a "blessing for life in the world to come" (2000: X)

In this book, the Jewish house of worship is not referred to as the synagogue. I have always disliked that term. It is a cold word, a Greek word. […]

I prefer to call the house of worship a shul. 'Shul' is a Yiddish term, originating by way of the old German *scuola* from the Latin *scola*, and it denotes what is, for me, the significant and

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saving feature of the house of worship as it developed in Jewish life: it is a place of study as well as a place of prayer. 'Shul' is a warm word, a Jewish word. I have always found it to be the friendliest of Jewish words, even when I have spurned its friendship.

(2000: IX-X; bolds mine)

Wieseltier fears "nothing more than finality" (222), life coming to an end; he sometimes fears for his senses (26). The confinement, the "contraction of experience" (25) makes him long for the forbidden, awakens his desire to rebel, to experience what is beyond confinement. But the senses "serve religion and the senses offer respite from religion" (27), a transition from the physical to the metaphysical.

He "dreads" his mother's and his sister's fear of living a present and a future marked by the absence of the husband and father. The reference points have changed and the coherence and materialization of love have changed as well. Leon Wieseltier moves from certainty (the certainty of life coming to an end, a fact that we have to accept) to doubt, together with the will to accept and the need to believe in the good fate of the soul.

Sin is again focused on as Wieseltier approaches the relation of biology to morality in Jewish tradition, investigating the concept of family, the duty of honouring and the choice of not honouring an evil parent, bringing into discussion a moral perspective. His findings favour either biology (the triumph of biology over morality), or morality (the triumph of morality over sin and biology). Sin is rooted in the search for God, the struggle between good and evil establishing the criteria of judgment and the "rights" of the individual (according to more or less accepted gradations of evil).

Furthermore, Wieseltier explores the issue of sin from the perspective of death and of the rites of mourning, denied or performed (should or should they not be performed?) for the deceased one, bringing into discussion the problem of evil parents related to duty. If one denies/rejects his community, they deny/reject him; a social "exchange" based on religion and perception of sin. But then what sins prevent the community from honouring the one who has passed away, from mourning him? The answers that Leon Wiesletier finds challenge some other limits and questions. The author cites a variety of sources and authorities, in his attempt to clarify the ambiguities or, in his words, "casuistic turns", "figments of eschatological imagination" (345): at the turn of the 12th century, Epstein spoke about gradations of evil, about ordinary evil ("a sin for pleasure" 329) and extraordinary evil (" a sin for principle"); an occasional sinner out of appetite is not to be called evil, whereas one that sins regularly is to be called so.

Mordecai (the second half of the 13th century) discusses the laws of mourning and again one finds out that mourning is forbidden if the individual sins regularly (knowing that what he does is forbidden), and if the individual is a "deviant" whose definition by rabbi Meir appears in Mordecai's text as the one "who separates himself from the ways of the community" (as quoted in Wieseltier, 333), a "rebel, in mind or in will" (334). Meir also insists on differentiating between (334) the weak ones ("the hedonist, the slacker, the one that seeks after gain") and the wicked ones ("the rebel, the blasphemer") and, at the same time, measures the gravity of sin by relating it to frequency and to motive.

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Wieseltier feels that he has gradually separated himself from the ways of the community. Is it a sin that could be forgiven? How does Jewish tradition regard his choice of living his life? Where is Leon Wieseltier's place in the world of his people? The deviant described is familiar to him, the figure of the one "ruled by angers and aspirations that he cannot control. […] He is not the rebel, or the heretic, or the traitor. He is one who wants to slip away, who never asked to be Jew, who is captivated by the rest of the world. He does not wish to violate the commandments. He merely wishes not to fulfill them." (340) How much will this freedom cost him? Is the price redemption, or torment? His motive is not subversion, as Wieseltier claims, he does not want to outrage community. He simply wants to live, to find some answers while traveling through life by the means he decides on, not denying some paths of this "garden", paths he is told not to follow.

As the end of the period for kaddish nears, Wieseltier grows scared of the world that would be revealed. The world he has been living in for eleven months is a world that has protected him from the absence of the father, a life dominated by the practice centered on the father perceived as presence. He now has to return to a life dominated by absence, a reality that can no longer be denied; there is no hanging on to it, no postponing as the Jewish law of mourning forbids it. "I did not want it to end. For as long as I have been organizing my life around the kaddish, I have been organizing my life around my father. When kaddish is over, he will be gone. […] I have lived in a state of suspension, shielded from a fatherless world by a fatherful practice. The Jewish way of mourning has turned an absence into a presence." (455)

It is in the end, once the stone has been unveiled, that Leon's fear, anger and doubts are conquered, and he frees himself from them. The answer that he has been looking for for a year is finally revealed to him: "I stepped closer to the grave and sang, and as I sang I broke away from my dread. […] Then I said the kaddish. I stood in the **ashes of fury** and spoke the sentences of praise. Was that voice my voice? It was no longer the effusion of woe. Magnified, I said. Sanctified, I said. I looked above me, I looked below me, I looked around me. With my own eyes, I saw magnificence." (585; bolds mine)

Is this the proof he needed? A proof that was not found in the written world, but in the real one. Now he knows. He saw magnificence, he found his peace of mind. The kaddish helped him. Just as it must have helped his father.

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