

Happiness, Stability
and Transcendence
in Western Religion,
Philosophy and Poetry

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By

Nili Alon Amit

With a Foreword by Fiorenza Bevilacqua

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לזמנא

This book is dedicated with love and gratitude to my dear parents, Pnina, may she rest in peace, and Hanan Alon, and to my beloved Guy, Noga, Libi and Rani Rafael Amit.

I am grateful to Fiorenza Bevilacqua for her dedicated and enlightening foreword to this book. Professor Bevilacqua's original and interesting ideas on happiness in ancient literature are a significant contribution to this field of study.

A special thank you goes to my inspiring friend and colleague, Professor Deborah Court.

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FOREWORD

BY FIORENZA BEVILACQUA

To the memory of Prof. Aristide Colonna.

This is an uncommon book on a theme that today more than ever compels us to think: it is the theme of happiness and our ways of achieving it or at least pursuing it, because perhaps more than this is not given to us, and happiness lies in its pursuit. I say today more than ever, because the Corona pandemic that has broken and spread throughout the world leaves us stunned not only and not so much for the difficulties and inconveniences in our daily lives, not only and not so much for the terrible fear to get sick and die, or the even more terrible fear to see people we love getting sick and dying: it is from something more profound that our dismay arises.

This pandemic, which has befallen us suddenly with its grave implications of sorrow and death, has something unbelievable, nearly oneiric for us, men and women of the twenty-first century; we have the privilege of living in the Western world, which is rich, well-ordered and well-provided with outstanding scientific and technological knowledge that abolished diseases (so we thought) and distances and invented amazing means for connecting, studying and meeting. The major epidemics of the past seemed to us very distant - associated with a world very different from ours - unrepeatable and impossible in our time. Those remote epidemics constituted simply episodes of canonical literary texts of Western culture: from the plague of Sophocles' (5th century BCE) *Oedipus Rex* and the plague in Athens, described by Thucydides (5th century BCE) with a cold stare and by Lucretius (1st century BCE) as a triumph of death, till the plagues that arise in two great novels of the twentieth century: *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann (1912) and *The Plague* by Albert Camus (1947). Hence our dismay, which even if it does not arise from the lockdown, certainly grows stronger and becomes stable in this long confinement: despite the remote working, the online lectures and meetings, the video calls with relatives and friends, it gives us some time, to some extent, to remain alone with ourselves. It is something which we are not accustomed to, because without knowing, without realizing and

perhaps without even wanting it, we always tend to avoid remaining alone by ourselves, bringing to light our anxieties and our questions that remain unanswered.

This disposition does not belong only to us, men and women of the twenty-first century: with reasonable confidence we can affirm that it is ingrained in human beings, as it is shown by the words written two thousand years ago, by the Epicurean philosopher and visionary poet Lucretius (c. 99 – 55 BCE) and by the Stoic philosopher and statesman Seneca (c. 4 BCE – 65 CE); both writings I will quote are marked by many shadows and are deeply versed in the twists and turns of the human mind. In his philosophical poem titled *On Nature* (*De rerum natura* which translates the Greek generic title *Peri physeōs* - Περὶ Φύσεως, usually given to Presocratic philosophers' works), Lucretius describes the anxiety and the restlessness of a man who runs from place to place without finding peace of mind, finally asking for oblivion by sleep, so that he will not think about anything anymore. This happens, according to Lucretius, because all humans try to run away from themselves, but nobody can do so: therefore everybody unwillingly remains tied to himself or herself and ends up in self-hatred:¹

*He yawns, as soon as foot has touched the threshold
Or drowsily goes off in sleep and seeks
Forgetfulness...
Each human flees himself- a self in sooth,
As happens, he by no means can escape;
And willy-nilly he cleaves to it and loathes,
Sick, sick, and guessing not the cause of ail.*

*Oscitat exetemplo, tetigit cum limina villae,
Aut abit in somnum gravis atque oblivia quaerit....
Hoc se quisque modo fugit, at quem scilicet, ut fit,
Effugere haud potis est, ingratiss haeret et odit
Propterea, morbi quia causam non tenet aeger.*

Human sickness, Lucretius proceeds, is given by the agonizing fear of death and the refusal to think about death, to examine what death is and what it will be for us (Book 3, lines 1076-1079):

*What evil lust of life is this so great
Subdues us to live, so dreadfully distraught*

¹ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Book 3, lines 1065-1066; 1068-1070; Latin source for Lucretius' text, here and below: Conte, G. B., Canali, L. and Dionigi, I. (1990); translation by Leonard, W. E. (1916).

2. RESHEET – IN A BEGINNING – HAPPINESS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The *Book of Genesis* is the core of Western myth and imagination. Transmitted for generations by oral tradition and compiled from various sources written between 9th-5th centuries BCE,¹⁰ it may be divided into myth (*Genesis* 1-11) and History (*Genesis* 12-50). The mythical bible begins with the creation of the world. History begins with the first biblical monotheist, Abraham the Patriarch.

Let us begin with the beginning – the creation of the world. The original Hebrew of *Genesis* 1:1 reads:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

(*B'eresheet bara Elohim et ha'shamaim v'et ha'aretz*)

*In a beginning created God the heaven and the earth.*¹¹

The *Septuagint* - the original Greek translation of the bible by Hebrew scholars (Alexandria, 3rd-2nd centuries BCE), reads:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν.

(*En arche epoiesen ho theos tov uranon kai ten gen.*)¹²

The Greek *arche* corresponds with the Hebrew *resheet* to mean “a beginning”; but the Greek term *arche* also means a **primary substance** or element. **Could it be that, according to the Bible and as transmitted into Greek by Hebrew scholars, God created our world - not in a chronological beginning, but within a primary substance?** Could there have been a prevalent substance in the world, preexisting God’s creation?

Genesis continues (1:2)

¹⁰ Davies, G. I. (2001), p. 19.

¹¹ Translation from the Hebrew Bible by Alon Amit. The JPS translation reads: “*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth*”.

¹² Valsamis, G. (2018), p. 15.

Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.

וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תוֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:

The first two verses of the Bible present God who creates within a primary substance, and then puts order in material chaos. This, in my view, is the basis of western views on happiness – our effort to mirror God’s first actions in the Bible: **dwellers of this corporeal, chaotic world, we strive to create form or stability in our lives, by clinging to a divine or external force.**

Happiness in the ancient sense of the word denotes **stability from within and from without**: the Hebrew word *osher* (אֲשֶׁר - happiness, blessedness) appears for the first time in the *Book of Genesis* 30:13 in the sense of *ishur* (אִשׁוּר - confirmation) - the satisfaction that arises by being confirmed from without:

And Leah said: ‘Happy am I! for the daughters will call me happy.’ And she called his name Asher.

וַתֹּאמֶר לְאָה בְּאֲשֶׁרֶי כִּי אֲשֶׁרֹנִי בְּגוֹת וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ אֲשֶׁר:

The Greek term for happiness, *eudaimonia* (well-being or blessedness), comes from *eu daimon* - εὖ δαίμων - (good demon) an external positive spirit that affects our lives. In both senses, happiness is an internal sense of well-being, confirmed, generated or driven by an external source.

The sequence of creation is highly relevant to western conceptions of happiness. *Genesis 2* elaborates on the enfolding of creation: first, God made earth and heaven. But there were still no plants on the ground, for there was no water to feed them and no man to help them grow (*Genesis* 2:4-5). So God raised a mist upon the earth, and then –

...the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul (Genesis 2:7).

וַיִּצְרֶה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְגַשְׁת׃
סָדָה:

In this sequence, we see that God first creates an ecosystem, and then combines earthly matter and his own spirit to form the first human - the first gardener of the divine ecosystem. Then, when there is fertile soil and a gardener,

...the Lord God planted a garden eastward, in Eden; and there He put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil... And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. (Genesis 2:8-9, 15).

וַיִּטֵּעַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים גֹּרֵעֶדֶן מִקֶּדֶם וַיִּשֶׂם שֵׁם אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר יִצְרָה:
וַיִּצְמַח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה פֶּלֶעֶץ נֹחַמֵד לְמִרְאֵה וְטוֹב לְמֵאֲכָל וַעֲץ הַמַּאֲכָל וַעֲץ הַחַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הַגֵּן
וַעֲץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב נֹרֵעַ:
...וַיִּשְׁקַח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיַּגִּתְהוּ בְּגוֹרֵעֶדֶן לְעִבְדָּהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ:

Life in the Garden of Eden was good, but it came with restrictions:

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying: 'Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.' (Genesis 2:16-17).

וַיִּצְוֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל־הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל־עֵץ־הַגֵּן אָכַל תֹּאכַל:
וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכַלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת:

Every fruit in the garden is free to man, except the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. Having eaten from this tree, man and woman are not put to death but are banished from the garden and are doomed to a life of misery on earth, lacking divine knowledge. This part of *Genesis* sets the scene for all future developments in the biblical narrative, and touches on the essence of the western quest for happiness. **There is divine knowledge of good and evil stored beyond our reach**, and it is very tempting. **Living a life dedicated to finding that knowledge elevates us above our worldly miseries and stabilizes our worldly lives.** We shall never taste that fruit again (believing that we can, may be *hubris* - a terrible sin), but **we can acknowledge and stabilize our place on earth while connecting with whatever transcendent knowledge is available to us through divine power.**

Genesis 11 transitions myth into history. It recounts the Tower of Babel and the long lives of unique people in the generations after the Great Flood. Abram, son of Terah, was born twenty generations after Adam and ten generations after Noah of the Ark, in Ur Kasdim (probably the ancient Sumerian city Uruk on the banks of the Euphrates River, nowadays Iraq). Terah tried to take his family to Canaan, but died on the way and they settled in Harran (Upper Mesopotamia, today's southeastern Anatolia, Turkey).

When Abram was 75 years old, married to Sarai and childless, he was approached by God. *Genesis* 12 begins with God's command to Abram:

Now the Lord said unto Abram: 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing. And I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee I will curse; and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.' (*Genesis* 12:1-3)

וְאַמְרַת יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵאמֹר קְמוּ וְצֵא מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וּמִבְּיַת אָבִיךָ וְהָלַךְ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָה:
וְאֶעֱשֶׂה לְךָ גְּדוּלָה וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדָּלְךָ וְשִׁמְךָ יִהְיֶה בְּרָבָה:
וְאֶבְרַכְךָ מִבְּרַכְיָי וּמִקְלָלֶיךָ אֶעֱרָא וּנְבָרְכֻךָ בְּךָ כֹּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה:

The historic bible begins with a direct command by God to a chosen person, and this person complies. The command is to leave his house and everything known to him, and follow this yet unknown god to a faraway place (interestingly, the same place that his father aspired to go though he could not complete his journey). By complying, Abram will be rewarded with the blessings of many children and a good name. The impossibility of Abram's reward, at least in modern eyes, is clear: a childless man of 75 can hardly hope for many children and to become a great nation. But Abram did believe. **Again, a foundational part of the bible begins with God creating a new order - planting a certain person in a certain place - and this person's compliance with God shall be rewarded with blessedness.**

When Abram and Sarai finally arrive in Canaan, it seems that their blessed future is still far from reach: Canaan is stricken by famine, and they are compelled to go down to Egypt for food. As we shall see in the writings of early 20th century Hebrew poets (chapter 12 of this book), Canaan is a promised land where people have to work very hard to see the fruit of their labours; Canaan is a utopia (from Greek – *ou topos* – “no place” or a non-existent place) - a symbol of blessedness, something to strive for amidst worldly chaos, a transcendent hope that can set our lives stable and hopefully happy.

The *Binding of Isaac* (*Genesis* 22) is a shocking instance at this early stage of biblical history, where the first biblical monotheist is willing, upon God's command, to sacrifice his only son. As in *Genesis* 12:1, there is no description of Abraham's reaction to God's request;¹³ God commands and

¹³ Abram was renamed Abraham in *Genesis* 17:5, after he was reconfirmed by God, and receives a new title with the addition of H, part of God's name, to his name;

Abraham complies. Having its source in oral tradition, it may have been that Abraham had a lot to say in reaction to God's terrible command, but these parts were omitted during the long history of oral transmission; the significance of the remaining version is striking: when God commands, the symbolic monotheist follows. Again, full submission to God's command results in a blessing:

...And an angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said: 'By Myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand that is on the sea-shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast hearkened to My voice.' (Genesis 22:15-18)

ויקרא מלאך יהוה אל־אברהם שנית מן־השמים:
וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי נְאֻם־יְהוָה כִּי יַעַן אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְלֹא חָשַׁקְתָּ אֶת־בְּנֶךְ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ:
כִּי־בָרַךְ אֲבְרָהָם וְהִרְבָּה אַרְבְּבָה אֶת־נַרְעָדוֹ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכַחֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל־שֵׁפֶת הַיָּם וַיִּרְשׁ וַיַּרְעֵד
אֶת שְׂעַר אֲנָבִיו:
וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְנֵי־נַרְעָדוֹ כָּל־גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ לְעַבְדֵי אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלִי:

Abraham hearkened to the voice of God, and is seen in both *Genesis* 12 and 22 as aligning himself with God's command from above, literally **understanding** it. The English word *understand*, like some other Indo-European and Germanic languages, denotes positioning oneself - probably in accordance with truth (eg. Greek *epi-stamai/ἐπίσταμαι*, German *ver-stehen*). In Hebrew, understanding, *binah* (בִּינָה), comes from the same root as for seeing/observing (*b.i.n* – ב.י.נ) – *hitbonenut* (הִתְבּוֹנְנוּת). These two sources of understanding - to align with heavenly truth, and to see or observe - will become main themes in the first writings of Greek philosophy (beginning 6th century BCE) with the Presocratics, Socrates and Plato.

according to some scholars, the name Abraham is a contraction of the Hebrew *Av Hamon* - father of many. See Ziemer, B. (2005), pp. 299-300.



Woman on a kayak, under-standing the sun.

3. THE STABILITY OF WISDOM – HAPPINESS IN PRESOCRATIC WRITINGS

When we leap forward in time, from the alleged period of Abraham the Patriarch (c. 1900 BC) to the first evidence of Greek philosophy (fragments of philosophical treatises, quoting philosophers of 7th-5th centuries BCE), we find a striking similarity in human preoccupation with seeking happiness through creating order in material turmoil - and moreover, a quest for defining the elementary materials that compose the universe (the biblical *arche*?) and the power that turns *chaos* into *cosmos* (κόσμος - order). Connection with this cosmic power will elevate us above worldly miseries and will make our lives happier. Well-being will be described as living wisely, under-standing the cosmic power and gaining knowledge from it.

In order to set the stage for Presocratic philosophy, imagine a world in flux. Imagine a world composed of four elements – water, earth and a whirlwind of air and fire, gushing, dissolving and conjoining in an everlasting circle, all guided by one stable principle: pure cosmic rational thought, or *logos* (λόγος).

This chaotic, yet highly structured worldview is described in some of the most ancient philosophical fragments known to us, by the Presocratic philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus (nowadays Western Turkey, c. 535- c. 475 BC). For Heraclitus, the material of the world is in constant flux. Indeed,

*You cannot step twice into the same rivers; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.*¹⁴

ποταμοῖσι τοῖσιν αὐτοῖσιν ἐμβαίνουσιν ἕτερα καὶ ἕτερα ὕδατα ἐπιρεῖ.

But keeping our heads above the turbulent water, being mentally aware of the flux and adhering to the stable principle of cosmic *logos* – will keep us

¹⁴ Heraclitus, Fragment 12 (Burnet). Greek source: D. 12, M. 40a. Arius Didymus fragment 39.2., ed. Diels, *Doxographi Graeci*, p. 471, 4; Kahn, C. H. (1979), p. 52; LM (2016), D65b.

knowledgeable, in control and in constant well-being. We will become aware of the greater picture and will be able to see it in logical terms:

*In the circumference of a circle the beginning and end are common, according to Heraclitus.*¹⁵

ξυνὸν γὰρ ἀρχὴ καὶ πέρας ἐπὶ κύκλου περιφερείας κατὰ τὸν Ἡράκλειτον.

Heraclitus' schema of material flux and stable wisdom will remain at the core of later Classical and Hellenistic cosmologies (Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics) with a similar promise for happiness resulting from awareness of the big picture and adherence to the stable principle of *logos*.

The Presocratics were fascinated with the material construct of the world, and hypothesized the primary elements that compose it. Flashing back to *Genesis* 1:2 (see chapter 2 above), the primordial state of the world is composed of earth, water, spirit (in the original Hebrew – *ruach*/ רִיחַ, wind) and void. We know that the Presocratic philosopher Thales of Miletos (c. 624/623 – c. 548/545 BC), Heraclitus' predecessor, reduced the material of the world to water.¹⁶ For Heraclitus, the primary matter of the world was fire, and the primary principle of the world was change:

¹⁵ Fragment 103 (translation by Burnet, with minor modification by Alon Amit). Greek source: D. 103, M. 34. Prophyry, *Questiones Homericae*, on *Iliad* XIV.200; Kahn (1979), p. 74; LM (2016), D54.

¹⁶ As reported by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* 1, 983b:

...Thales, the founder of this school of philosophy, says the permanent entity is water (which is why he also propounded that the earth floats on water). Presumably he derived this assumption from seeing that the nutriment of everything is moist... and also from the fact that the seeds of everything have a moist nature, whereas water is the first principle of the nature of moist things.

...ἀλλὰ Θαλῆς μὲν ὁ τῆς τοιαύτης ἀρχηγὸς φιλοσοφίας ὕδωρ φησὶν εἶναι (διὸ καὶ τὴν γῆν ἐφ' ὕδατος ἀπεφίηνατο εἶναι), λαβὼν ἴσως τὴν ὑπόληψιν ταύτην ἐκ τοῦ πάντων ὄραν τὴν τροφὴν ὑγρὰν οὖσαν... καὶ διὰ τὸ πάντων τὰ σπέρματα τὴν φύσιν ὑγρὰν ἔχειν, τὸ δ' ὕδωρ ἀρχὴν τῆς φύσεως εἶναι τοῖς ὑγροῖς.

Translation: Tredennick, H. (1933, 1989).

*This world, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now, and ever shall be an ever-living Fire, with measures of it kindling, and measures going out.*¹⁷

κόσμον τὸν αὐτὸν ἀπάντων οὔτε τις θεῶν οὔτε ἀνθρώπων ἐποίησεν, ἀλλ' ἦν ἀεὶ καὶ ἔστιν καὶ ἔσται πῦρ ἀείζωνον, ἀπτόμενον μέτρα καὶ ἀποσβεννύμενον μέτρα.

The world pre-existed the gods. It is always in change, and the only stable principle is **measure** – there is some kind of measure ruling and guiding the world. This measure is called *wisdom* - *sophos* or *logos* – the logic that gives an overall structure to this everchanging world:

*Wisdom is one thing. It is to know the thought by which all things are steered through all things.*¹⁸

ἔν τὸ σοφόν· ἐπίστασθαι γνῶμην ὅκη κυβερνήσαι πάντα διὰ πάντων.

Being wise means understanding the *wisdom* that guides all things. This *wisdom* is stable, while the world flows and changes constantly. But not only nature or flowing water is in constant renewal – we, human beings, are ever changing as well:

*We step and do not step in to the same rivers; we are and are not.*¹⁹

ποταμοῖς τοῖς αὐτοῖς ἐμβαίνομέν τε καὶ οὐκ ἐμβαίνομεν, εἶμεν τε καὶ οὐκ εἶμεν.

The highest virtue is living in accordance with truth:

*Thought is common to all. Those who speak with understanding must hold fast to what is common to all...For all human laws are fed by one divine law...*²⁰

ξὺν νόφ λέγοντας ἰσχυρίζεσθαι χρῆ τῷ ξυνῷ πάντων... τρέφονται γὰρ πάντες οἱ ἀνθρώπειοι νόμοι ὑπὸ ἐνὸς τοῦ θείου...

¹⁷ Fragment 30 (Burnet). Greek source: D. 30. M. 51. Clement, *Stromateis* V. 103.6; Kahn (1979), p. 44; LM (2016), D85.

¹⁸ Fragment 41 (Burnet). Greek source: D. 41, M. 85; Diogenes Laertius IX.1. Kahn (1979), p. 54; LM (2016), D44.

¹⁹ Fragment 49a (Burnet). Greek source: B.49a. Heraclitus, *Quest. Homer.* 24.5. Taran, L. (1989), p. 4; LM (2016), D65a.

²⁰ Fragment 114 (Burnet), abbreviated by Alon Amit. Greek source: D. 114, M. 23a. Stobaeus III.1.179. Kahn (1979) p. 42; LM (2016), D105.

The world that Heraclitus depicts for us is in constant flow, like gushing rivers. Human lucidity, stability, and well-being are in adherence to the only constant principle in this world – wisdom, or divine law.

Heraclitus sets the stage for deeper inquiry into the connection between wisdom and happiness in western thought. **The cosmos** that was introduced in the Hebrew Bible and reiterated in Heraclitus' fragments,²¹ **is described as a combination of material elements in constant flux, with an overpowering transcendent organizing agent (God or wisdom) which is the only stable entity in the world; connecting with this stable transcendence will give us balance and happiness.**

Socrates and Plato (5th and 4th centuries BC Athens) will take this conception further, in depicting a heavenly realm of perfect wisdom or ideas; human connection with this realm or the ability to observe it with our mental eye, will result in blissful happiness.

²¹ On interrelations between ancient mediterranean cosmogonies, see: West, M. L. (1994), pp. 292-3.

4. *EUDAIMONIA* – HAPPINESS IN CLASSICAL GREEK PHILOSOPHY

Classical Greek thought brought the Presocratic search for world order to perfection. Highly esthetic and in classic architectural design, Plato's cosmology split the world in two realms: the chaotic, illusive world of matter, and an orderly, rational and immaterial realm of truth. While the Heraclitean world showed chaos pervaded by reason, **Plato draws a clear distinction between the world of chaos and the world of reason: chaos is on earth and reason is in the heavens. We human beings are imprisoned here in the material world and within material bodies, but our souls are immaterial and they strive to be released to the realm of truth.** Finding truth is a journey through great obstacles – it is a journey of overcoming our misleading bodily senses, and working with our minds to find abstract truth. This journey is well depicted in Plato's famous *Allegory of the Cave* (*Republic* 7, 514a-516c):

“After this, then,” I said, “compare our own nature as regards both education and the lack of it to such experience as this. Imagine people as it were in an underground dwelling like a cave... They have been there since childhood shackled by the legs and the neck, so that they remain in the same spot facing only forward, unable to turn their head right round because of the chains.”²²

μετὰ ταῦτα δὴ, εἶπον, ἀπέικασον τοιοῦτω πάθει τὴν ἡμετέραν φύσιν παιδείας τε περὶ καὶ ἀπαιδευσίας. ἰδὲ γὰρ ἀνθρώπους οἷον ἐν καταγείῳ οἰκῆσει σπηλαιώδει... ἐν ταύτῃ ἐκ παίδων ὄντας ἐν δεσμοῖς καὶ τὰ σκέλη καὶ τοὺς ἀχένας, ὥστε μένειν τε αὐτοὺς εἷς τε τὸπρὸςθεν μόνον ὄραν, κύκλω δὲ τὰς κεφαλὰς ὑπὸ τοῦ δεσμοῦ ἀδυνάτους περιάγειν...

The human condition described in this allegory is that of imprisonment and inability to learn anything but what one's limited eyesight can perceive. Now, a lucky person is released from the chains:

Whenever anyone was freed and suddenly made to stand up, look around, walk, and look up toward the light, it would be painful doing all this and

²² Translation: Emlyn-Jones, C. and Preddy, W. (2013), abbreviated by Alon Amit.

because of the glare he would be unable to see the object whose shadow he saw before.

ὁπότε τις λυθείη καὶ ἀναγκάζεται ἑξαίφνης ἀνίστασθαι τε καὶ περιάγειν τὸν αὐχένα καὶ βαδίζειν καὶ πρὸς τὸ φῶς ἀναβλέπειν, πάντα δὲ ταῦτα ποιῶν ἀλγοῖ τε καὶ διὰ τὰς μαρμαρυγὰς ἀδυνατοῖ καθορᾶν ἐκεῖνα ὧν τότε τὰς σκιὰς εἶρα...

Interestingly, we must be “made” (the original Greek term is *anankazo/ἀναγκάζω* – be forced) to stand up and learn. Once we do so, we are first overwhelmed by learning. The first contact with light is painful and dazzling. Imagine what would happen if the learner would climb out of the cave (or rather be pulled out) to perceive the light of day:

And if... someone were to drag him forcibly from there along the rough, steep uphill path and not let him go until he had hauled him out into the light of the sun, he would be in great pain and would complain about his being dragged along, and when he got to the light his eyes would be filled with the sun's rays, and he would not be able to see even a single one of what he is now being told are real things, wouldn't he?

εἰ δέ... ἐντεῦθεν ἔλκοι τις αὐτὸν βίᾳ διὰ τραχείας τῆς ἀναβάσεως καὶ ἀνάντους, καὶ μὴ ἀνεῖηπρὶν ἐξελεκύσειεν εἰς τὸ τοῦ ἡλίου φῶς, ἄρα οὐχὶ ὀδυνᾶσθαι τε ἂν καὶ ἀγανακτεῖν ἐλκόμενον καὶ ἐπειδὴ πρὸς τὸ φῶς ἔλθοι, αὐγῆς ἂν ἔχοντα τὰ ὄμματα μεστὰ ὀρᾶν οὐδ' ἂν ἐν δύνασθαι τῶν νῦν λεγομένων ἀληθῶν;

Learning is painful and should be done gradually and with the right instruction. But once we learn – once we are pulled out of our cave – oh, the beauties we perceive! The highest truth is symbolized by the sun. The human eye can't look at it directly; **it is only with the power of our minds that we can contemplate the sun** – and this abstract cognitive activity will give us happiness:

“Then finally he would be able to see the sun, I think, not its reflection in water or even any other surface, but by itself alone in its proper place and he would be able to contemplate what kind of a thing it is... And straight after this he would be able to infer about it that this is what provides the seasons, the years, and governs everything in the visible world, and is somehow responsible for all those things which they themselves used to see...

Then what does this mean? When he recalls his first dwelling and the wisdom picked up there and his former fellow prisoners, don't you think he would be delighted by the transformation and pity the others?”

τελευταῖον δὴ οἶμαι τὸν ἥλιον, οὐκ ἐν ὕδασι οὐδ' ἐν ἀλλοτρίᾳ ἔδρα φαντάσματα αὐτοῦ, ἀλλ' αὐτὸν καθ' αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ χώρᾳ δύναται ἄν κατιδεῖν καὶ θεάσασθαι οἷός ἐστιν...

καὶ μετὰ ταῦτ' ἂν ἤδη συλλογίζοιτο περὶ αὐτοῦ ὅτι οὗτος ὁ τάς τε ὥρας παρέχων καὶ ἐνιαυτούς καὶ πάντα ἐπιτροπεύων τὰ ἐν τῷ ὁρωμένῳ τόπῳ, καὶ ἐκείνων ὧν σφεῖς ἐώρων τρόπον τινὰ πάντων αἴτιος... τί οὖν; ἀναμνησκόμενον αὐτὸν τῆς πρώτης οἰκίσεως καὶ τῆς ἐκεῖ σοφίας καὶ τῶν τότε συνδεσμιωτῶν οὐκ ἂν οἶε αὐτὸν μὲν εὐδαιμονίζειν τῆς μεταβολῆς, τοὺς δὲ ἐλεεῖν;

Happiness, for Plato, is freedom from the chains of matter – it comes when by rational contemplation we overcome our deceptive bodily senses and let our souls perceive eternal heavenly truths.

Now, to Plato's teacher. Socrates (c. 470-399 BCE) is an enigmatic figure in ancient literature; it is still unclear if he is a historical or a fictional character in the philosophical writings of Plato and Xenophon and in a comedy by Aristophanes. We learn about him especially from Plato's writings, where Socrates is given the role of a barefoot philosopher who walks the streets of Athens and renounces all earthly matters, especially that of false pride. He stops people of various social roles on the street (a statesman, a general, a rhapsodist, and more) and through interrogation about the *essence* of their professions, makes them understand that they actually do not understand anything. The essences of all earthly matters are not on earth but in the heavenly realm, and they are called *ideas*. The word *idea* comes from the Greek *idein* (ἰδεῖν), later Latin *vid* - to see. They are far beyond the reach of the human eye; but **a life dedicated to the contemplation of ideas is a life of wisdom, virtue and happiness.**

Plato expands on this philosophy in a corpus of essays called *Dialogues* – most of them recounting conversations between Socrates and his pupils. Three important dialogues relate Socrates' (or is it Plato's?) theory of soul and the soul's striving for happiness: *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Timaeus*. *Phaedo* tells the story of Socrates at his final hour (he was sentenced to death by the state of Athens for impiety to gods and corruption of young minds), explaining to his grief-stricken pupils why he is not afraid to die. **The soul, Socrates explains, is actually better off when it leaves the body.** The earthly body is a prison to the heavenly soul: during our earthly lives we learn through our bodily (material) senses, and since everything material is temporary – our knowledge is limited. **While we live, we should direct our souls toward contemplation that is free from sensual or bodily data (abstract thinking) – and this should be done by pondering**

the essences of things rather than their physical traits. We should direct our souls upwards - toward the eternal heavenly ideas, and thus elevate ourselves above temporary, material concerns. The journey upward toward wisdom is beautifully depicted in *Phaedo* 65(a-c):

*“Now, how about the acquirement of pure knowledge? ...When does the soul attain to truth? ...In thought, then, if at all, something of the realities becomes clear to it? ...But it thinks best when none of these things troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor any pleasure, but it is, so far as possible, alone by itself, and takes leave of the body, and avoiding, so far as it can, all association or contact with the body, reaches out toward the reality.”*²³

τί δὲ δὴ περὶ αὐτὴν τὴν τῆς φρονήσεως κτῆσιν;...πότε οὖν, ἢ δ’ ὅς, ἡ ψυχὴ τῆς ἀληθείας ἄπτεται;... ἄρ’ οὖν οὐκ ἐν τῷ λογίζεσθαι εἴπερ που ἄλλοθι κατάδηλον αὐτῇ γίγνεται τι τῶν ὄντων;... **λογίζεται δὲ γέ που τότε κάλλιστα, ὅταν αὐτὴν τούτων μηδὲν παραλυπῇ, μήτε ἀκοὴ μήτε ὄψις μήτε ἀλγηδὼν μηδὲ τις ἡδονή, ἀλλ’ ὅτι μάλιστα αὐτὴ καθ’ αὐτὴν γίγνεται ἕωσα χαιρείν τὸ σῶμα, καὶ καθ’ ὅσον δύναται μὴ κοινωνοῦσα αὐτῷ μηδ’ ἄπτομένη ὀρέγεται τοῦ ὄντος.**

Plato’s dialogue *Symposium* interestingly draws a connection between **wisdom** and **love** in the soul's quest for happiness. It ponders the essence of *eros* (ἔρως) – desire or curiosity. We learn through curiosity and are driven by desire for knowledge. Ascending in knowledge is like falling in love – we first recognize the beauty of the physical body, and then desire better knowledge of it. **True love or wisdom (what we would call today Platonic love) is that which seeks knowledge that goes beyond the physical bodies and ponders the essences of things.**

Plato’s *Symposium* is a quest for the definition of *eros*: Socrates, the main character, reports what he learned from a Priestess of Mantinea named Diotima/ Διοτίμα (meaning in Greek - *Respect of God*) - that **ascending in knowledge by desire means reaching the highest state of happiness:**

Beginning from obvious beauties he must for the sake of that highest beauty be ever climbing aloft, as on the rungs of a ladder, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; from personal beauty he proceeds to beautiful observances, from observance to beautiful learning, and from learning at last to that particular study which is concerned with the beautiful itself and that alone; so that in the end he comes to know the very essence of beauty.

²³ Translation: Fowler, H. N. (1966), abbreviated and marked in bold by Alon Amit.

In that state of life above all others... a man finds it truly worth while to live, as he contemplates essential beauty. (Plato, *Symposium* 211c-d)²⁴

ἀρχόμενον ἀπὸ τῶνδε τῶν καλῶν ἐκείνου ἕνεκα τοῦ καλοῦ ἀεὶ ἐπανιέναι, ὡσπερ ἐπαναβασμοῖς χρώμενον, ἀπὸ ἐνὸς ἐπὶ δύο καὶ ἀπὸ δυοῖν ἐπὶ πάντα τὰ καλὰ σώματα, καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν καλῶν σωμάτων ἐπὶ τὰ καλὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα, καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν ἐπιτηδευμάτων ἐπὶ τὰ καλὰ μαθήματα, καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν μαθημάτων ἐπ' ἐκεῖνο τὸ μάθημα τελευτῆσαι, ὃ ἐστὶν οὐκ ἄλλου ἢ αὐτοῦ ἐκείνου τοῦ καλοῦ μάθημα, καὶ γινῶ αὐτὸ τελευτῶν ὃ ἐστὶ καλόν. **ἐνταῦθα τοῦ βίου... εἴπερ που ἄλλοθι, βιωτὸν ἀνθρώπων, θεωμένῳ αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν.**

Philosophy, for Plato, is a way of living that leads to happiness – following the soul's loving desire for transcendent, abstract knowledge. The stage of desire for knowledge is the midway between earth and heaven: while we live, we can never go beyond this stage toward complete heavenly knowledge (as we already learned in *Genesis* 2; see chapter 2 above), but being in-between will place us in the realm of the spiritual (*daimones*);²⁵ Socrates' conversation with the priestess Diotima (*Symposium* 202d-203a) continues:

'What then, ' I asked, 'can Love [Eros] be? ...

'As I previously suggested, between a mortal and an immortal.' ...'A great spirit, Socrates: for the whole of the spiritual (daimones) is between divine and mortal.'

“Possessing what power?’ I asked.

*“Interpreting and transporting human things to the gods and divine things to men; entreaties and sacrifices from below, and ordinances and requitals from above: being midway between, it makes each to supplement the other, so that the whole is combined in one. ...**God with man does not mingle: but the spiritual is the means of all society and converse of men with gods and of gods with men, whether waking or asleep.** Whosoever has skill in these affairs is a spiritual (daimonios) man to have it in other matters, as in common arts and crafts, is for the mechanical. Many and multifarious are these spirits, and one of them is Love (Eros).’²⁶*

τί οὖν ἄν, ἔφην, εἴη ὁ Ἔρως;...

²⁴ Translation: Lamb, W. R. M. (1925), abbreviated and marked in bold by Alon Amit.

²⁵ For the universality of truth in intermediate states, see example from the *Kashmiri Vijnana Bhairava Tantra* (Indian philosophy, 9th century CE), p. 3 above.

²⁶ Translation: Fowler, H. N. (1925), marked in bold by Alon Amit.