

Article

Biblical versus Greek Narratives for Suicide Prevention and Life Promotion: Releasing Hope from Pandora's Urn

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Abstract: Although suicide has been unfortunately stigmatized unfairly through the ages, we should not make the mistake of going to the opposite extreme and valorizing it. We should not forget that the major role of health care professionals is to prevent suicide when possible and to invigorate the underlying life force in the person. Suicide is often the ultimate outcome of a tragic and pessimistic view of life. It was prevalent in ancient Greek writing. Indeed, over 16 suicides and self-mutilations can be found in the 26 surviving tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides. In contrast, only six suicides can be found in the Hebrew Scriptures, and only one suicide in the Christian Scriptures. In addition, the Hebrew Scriptures present numerous suicide-prevention narratives that effectively provide a psychological instruction for people in despair which seems unavailable to figures in the writings of the great Greek tragedians. Unfortunately, some religious traditions tended to go to the opposite extreme in stigmatizing suicide rather than understanding it and trying to prevent it. This paper examines evidence regarding seven evidence-based risk factors for suicide: (1) Feeling depressed and isolated; (2) Feeling one's life is without purpose; (3) Being a refugee from one's homeland; (4) Feeling unable to express oneself with others; (5) Being adopted; (6) Feeling abandoned by one's child leaving the family nest; and (7) Feeling doomed by a dysfunctional (indeed incestuous) family of origin. We contrast biblical and Greek narratives regarding each of these factors, respectively: (1) Elijah against Ajax, (2) Job against Zeno, (3) David against Coriolanus, (4) Jonah against Narcissus, (5) Moses against Oedipus, (6) Rebecca against Phaedra, and finally, (7) Ruth against Antigone. These biblical figures thrive across risk factors while their Greek and Roman counterparts kill or mutilate themselves or provoke others to do the job. All these contrasts should demonstrate to psychotherapists, counselors, and clergy alike as to how Greek narratives lead to self-destructive behaviors while biblical narratives provide a hopeful positive psychology, and a constructive way out these dilemmas. My colleagues (Paul Cantz, Matthew Schwartz, and Moriah Markus-Kaplan) and I call for a biblical psychotherapy for positive psychology, suicide prevention, and indeed life promotion. Where hope is locked up in Pandora's urn after she has released all the evils unto the world, the biblical God places hope into the sky as a bow after Noah and his family and all the creatures on the ark disembark to land after the receding of the flood.

Keywords: suicide; suicide prevention; life-affirmation; biblical-rabbinic; Graeco-Roman; hope; despair; fatalism; freedom



Citation: Kaplan, Kalman J. 2021. Biblical versus Greek Narratives for Suicide Prevention and Life Promotion: Releasing Hope from Pandora's Urn. *Religions* 12: 238. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040238>

Academic Editor: Curtis Lehmann

Received: 25 December 2020

Accepted: 9 March 2021

Published: 26 March 2021

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In 2016 New York Times report, [Tavernise \(2016\)](#) reported suicides in America had reached a 30-year high. We have been having a suicide epidemic.

The question of suicide has existed as far back as we can remember. Shakespeare raised it in Hamlet's ponderings expressed in the best-known soliloquy in Western letters.

To be or not to be, that is the question, whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet (Act 3, Scene 1)* ¹

Seldom has the question of life and death been posed so earnestly. Hamlet places life and its attendant suffering in one hand and death and the supposed cessation of suffering

¹ ([Shakespeare 2014b](#)).

in the other. The centrality of the question of suicide in the human agenda has also been stated very directly in the quotation above by the French existentialist Albert Camus, which he follows with this sentence: “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (Camus 1955, p. 3).

In this paper, I will examine this question historically, and then psychologically, concentrating on concrete narratives comparing seven matched Biblical and Graeco-Roman figures, which we have employed clinically (see the work of Shestov [1937] 1966; Snell 1953; Wellisch 1954).

1. Historical Views of Suicide

1.1. Suicide in the Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds

The ancient Greek and biblical worlds 1003, presented diametrically opposite views of life, death, and suicide. Let us turn to the Greeks (and Romans) first. Suicidologist Henry Romilly Fedden (1938, pp. 70–85) has placed Greek attitudes toward suicide into three camps: Pythagoras, Aristotle, and the Epicureans were opposed to it; Plato and Socrates took a guarded middle position; and the Cynics and Stoics accepted it. Although this view is oversimplified, it provides an acceptable beginning for a discussion of these schools of thought (Kaplan and Schwartz 1993, 2008).

The Pythagoreans: For the Pythagoreans, suicide is a rebellion against an almost mathematical discipline set by the gods. Death comes when it should, and at that time it can be welcomed. “There is a set number of souls, according to Pythagoras, that is available in the world at any one time. Killing oneself creates a gap by upsetting this mathematical equilibrium, and thus we must reject it.” (see Fedden 1938, p. 71). Despite this philosophy, several accounts portrayed Pythagoras as letting himself be killed or actively committing suicide. According to one account, Pythagoras allowed pursuers to catch and kill him in preference to trampling on a field of beans (Laertius 1972, 8.45).

Socrates: Four general themes in the teachings of Socrates eased the road to suicide in the classical period. First, he made several references to the nature of the afterworld. For Socrates, Hades (if it existed at all) was not so frightening a place as it was to the Homeric hero. In the closing section of Plato’s *Apology* Socrates asks rhetorically:

If on arrival in the other world, beyond the reach of our so-called justice, one will find there the true judges who are said to preside in those courts, Minos and Rhadamanthes and Aeacus and Triptolemus... to meet Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer... would that be an unrewarding journey?... What would one not give... to be able to question the leader of that great host against Troy, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus? *Apology* (Plato 1999e, 41a–42a)

Second, Plato posited a conflictual and unfortunate between body and soul. “The soul is a helpless prisoner chained hand and foot in the body compelled to view reality not directly but only through its prison bars, and wallowing in utter ignorance” (Plato 1999b, *Phaedo*, 83a).” Only the soul can perceive “Ideal Truth,” but it cannot do so while it must perceive reality through the use of the five bodily senses. Thus, the real attainment of truth can come only in the higher world when souls can perceive directly—without the interference of the body. This position does not necessarily lead to a direct call to suicide, but it does encourage the philosopher to believe that separation from earthly life is the only road to the “Ideal” human existence.

The third point that may have facilitated suicide was Socrates’ general view, which he expressed in different forms on a number of occasions, that philosophy is “preparation for death.” While awaiting execution after his trial, Socrates maintains in an argument to Simmias and Cebes:

Other people are likely not to be aware that those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead. Now if this is true, it would be absurd to be eager for nothing but this all their lives, and then to be troubled when that came for which they had all along been eagerly practicing. (Plato 1999b, *Phaedo* 64a)

Fourth, Plato (1999b) posited a conflictual and unfortunate opposition, if not antagonism, between body and soul. True philosophers practice dying and thus fear death less than do other people do (*Phaedo*, 68a). The argument continues along the line that, unlike the ordinary person, the philosopher understands that death is not a great evil (ibid, 68d). Thus, it seems only a short step for Cebes to ask Socrates what the grounds are for saying that suicide is not legitimate (ibid, 62a). Socrates concedes Cebes' point (ibid, 62b) and gives his famous guard-post allegory as an argument against suicide. Life is a sorry business, but we must not leave our guard-post unless we are relieved (ibid, 62b–c).

Although Socrates seemed to be full of life energy, he epitomized Greek thinking in his view of death. All of his life is only to die; all of philosophy is but preparation for death. Xenophon offered his view of Socrates' trial in his usual direct, matter-of-fact style: he completely agreed with Socrates that at that point "to die was better for him than to live" (Xenophon 1857, *Apology*, 31).

Plato: Plato's views on suicide seem a bit more complicated. On the one hand, he called for the denial of a regular burial for a suicide (Plato 1999a, *Laws*, 9.12). On the other hand, at least according to Olympiodorus, Plato seemed to admit that "suicide may be proper to the worthy man, to him of a middle character, and to the multitude and depraved." To the worthy person, as in the *Phaedo* (Plato 1999b, 62b–c); to one of a middle character, as in *The Republic* (Plato 1999d, 3.406d), if he "is afflicted with a long and incurable disease, as being useless to the city"; and to the vulgar character, as in *The Laws* (Plato 1999a, 8.838), if he is "possessed with certain incurable passions, such as being enamored of his mother... and who is incapable of governing himself" (Plotinus 1918, *On Suicide*, 1a).

Plotinus, the third-century C.E. Neo-Platonist, agreed with Plato's view that death is to be welcomed by the philosopher, but not sought before its proper time: "You should not expel the soul from the body. For in departing, it will retain something (of the more passive life), which is necessary in this case to its departure" (ibid, 1.9). Plotinus followed Plato in suggesting that there may indeed be times when suicide becomes necessary: "The soul is not to be separated from the body while a further proficiency is yet possible." Porphyry noted that when he himself was contemplating suicide, Plotinus convinced him that it was not a rational decision but was based on too much black bile.

Aristotle: Aristotle seemed less obsessed with the idea of suicide than Plato, his mentor, was; the subject occupies only a few lines in his many extant writings. He argues that, for certain reasons, suicide is the act of a coward: for example, suicide as an escape from "poverty or disappointed love or bodily or mental anguish is the deed of a coward. The suicide braves death not for some noble object but to escape ill" (Aristotle 1976, *Ethics*, 3.7). Aristotle adds that suicide is an injustice against the state, which the state may punish. Unlike Socrates' allegory in the *Phaedo*, Aristotle does not mention that humans are the property of the gods, but only as obligated to the state.

But the man who cuts his throat in a fit of temper is voluntarily doing an injury which the law does not allow. It follows that the suicide commits an injustice. But against whom? Is it not the State rather than himself? For he suffers of his own volition, and nobody suffers injustice voluntarily. It is for this reason that the State attaches a penalty, which takes the form of a stigma put on one who has destroyed himself, on the ground that he is guilty of the offense against the State. (Aristotle 1976, *Ethics*, 5.11)

Although there was no monolithic doctrine on suicide in the later Greco-Roman philosophical traditions, it is clear that suicide was widely accepted as within the limits of normal options.

The Cynics: Beginning with Diogenes of Sinope, the Cynic school of philosophy taught the importance of living simply and renouncing all attachments. They lived as wandering beggars with no possessions of their own, maintaining the sparest of dress and diet.

Poor to begin with or renouncing their property voluntarily they lived as beggars. Possessing no houses of their own, they passed the day in the streets, or in other public places; the nights they spent in porticos, or wherever else chance might find them. Furniture they had none. A bed seemed superfluous. The simple Greek dress was by them made still

simpler... In scantiness of diet, they even surpassed the very limited requirements of their countrymen (Zeller 1962, pp. 317–18).

Diogenes undertook self-mortification when his teacher was not sufficiently severe. Should life become unsupportable, they reserved for themselves the right of suicide. When the seriously ill Antisthenes cried out, “Who will release me from these pains?” Diogenes answered, “This,” and showed him a dagger. “I said,” replied Antisthenes, “from my pains, not from life.” About this, Diogenes Laertius (the chronicler) commented: “It was thought that he showed some weakness in leaving his malady through love of life” (Diogenes Laertius 1972, 6.18). Although there are contradictory accounts, Diogenes Laertius (1972) reported that the Cynic Diogenes committed suicide by holding his breath (6.76), as did two later Cynics, Metrocles (6.95) and Menippus (6.100).

The Epicureans: The Epicureans lived according to a moderate pleasure principle. Epicurus, the father of Epicureanism, put it simply: “Pleasure is the beginning and end of living happily” (Diogenes Laertius 1972, 10.128). On the surface, Epicurus seems to have been indifferent to questions of death and suicide: “Death is nothing to us, since when we are, death has not come, and when death has come, we are not” (ibid, 10.125). At times, he seems to have been opposed to suicide: “The wise man will not withdraw himself from life” (ibid, 10.120). However, close examination indicates a somewhat more complicated position. Epicurus defined happiness in terms of internal rather than external states. Whereas Plato justified suicide under intolerable external circumstances. Epicurus seemed to do so in terms of avoiding internal suffering. Unlike Epicurus, Hegesias of Cyrene concluded that life contains more pain than pleasure; therefore, the only logical outcome is suicide. The “preacher of death” argued his viewpoint so well, according to Cicero, that a wave of suicides took place in Alexandria, and Ptolemy II had to banish Hegesias from the land (Cicero 1945, *Tusc. Disp.*, 1.34.83).

The Stoics: The Stoics seemed to regard neither life nor death as very important. At the same time, they seemed almost obsessed with the idea of suicide as a way of overcoming their fear of death. In a sense, the Stoics attempted to conquer death by choosing it on their own terms. At best, the philosopher should commit suicide not to escape suffering but to avoid restrictions in carrying out life, since he should be as unaffected by suffering as by any other emotions.

The Stoics did not accept the idea of a caring and loving deity, and they were also too deep as thinkers to place much permanent value on so limited a prospect as human success. They knew that they must fulfill their moral and social duty, but they could never desire reward, recognition, or love, and could never even feel secure that their good acts would produce a good result.

Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school, defined the goal of life as living in agreement with nature (Diogenes Laertius 1972, 7.87). If such an agreement exists, life is good; if it does not exist, suicide becomes the wise choice (7.130). Therefore, Zeno was said to have killed himself, (perhaps out of sheer irritation) when he wrenched his toe by stumbling on his way home from the stoa (i.e., the porch on which he taught). He held his breath until he died (7.20). We will discuss his death in detail in Chapter 6. His successor, Cleanthes, fasted to death. Initially, Cleanthes began his fast to cure a boil on his gum; ultimately, however, “he had advanced so far on his journey toward death, he would not retreat,” and he starved himself to death (7.176).

The Roman Stoics basically agreed with their earlier Greek counterparts—with one important shift. The question was no longer whether or when to kill oneself when life became intolerable, but how to do so in the right way. This attribute can be seen in a sampling of the writings of Cicero. Suicide, Cicero argues, is no great evil.

When a man’s circumstances contain a preponderance of things in accordance with nature, it is appropriate for him to remain alive: when he possesses or sees in prospect a majority of the contrary things, it is appropriate for the wise man to quit life, although he is happy, and also for the foolish man to remain in life although he is miserable.... And very often it is appropriate for the wise

man to abandon life at a moment when he is enjoying supreme happiness, if an opportunity offers for making a timely exit. For the Stoic view is that happiness, which means life in harmony with nature, is a matter of seizing the right moment. (Cicero 1914, *De Finibus*, 3.60 and 61)

In the *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero (1945) depicts death as freeing humans from chains. The gods in their benevolence have prepared for humans a haven and refuge after their departure from worldly life (1.18). Some philosophers disagreed with this, and some Stoics even felt that the soul is not immortal. Indeed, while earthly life is not wholly evil, the afterlife holds far more joy (1.84).

Cicero cites the deaths of Socrates and Cato as examples that suicide is permissible, but only when the gods themselves have given a valid reason. One must not break the prison bonds except in obedience to the magistrate. The human soul should be dissociated from the body during life by means of philosophy and virtue, for such a life will best prepare the soul for the afterlife. It is highly desirable for one to quit the sorrows of this world to gain the joys of the next (Cicero 1945, 1.71–75).

Much the same view can be seen in a sampling of the declamations of the elder Seneca (ca. 40 C. E). These declamations were a series of arguments on a variety of subjects and were widely used as training for law students. Whatever may have been the various opinions in individual cases, suicide was hardly shocking to either the speakers or the listeners.

A man whose wife and three children have died in a fire tries to hang himself, but he is cut down and saved by a passerby. Is the passerby guilty of an offense? The passerby argues that a person must have hope and that, in any case, if the man had truly wanted to hang himself, he should have done so immediately after the fire. The would-be suicide argues: “It is a wrong done me if I have to die at your will when I should have died at mine.” The one who attempted suicide is not accused; rather, the one who stopped him is accused (Seneca the Elder 1974, *Controversiae*, 5.1).

Suicide is also a major subject in the letters of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, the brilliant Roman writer and statesman. The younger Seneca’s writings show a deep concern and awareness of death. Man is always no more “than a moment ahead of the universal doom” (Seneca the Younger n.d., *Ep.*, 71.15). Hope for the betterment of the human condition is false. “Truth doesn’t grow and neither does virtue” (ibid, 71.16). One must continue to try but not because there is any hope of success. Pacurius held his own wake every night, believing that anyone who can say “my life is lived” rises daily from his bed to a sense of something gained (ibid, 12.8–10).

One may hope for good but must always be prepared for the worst. People discover too late that they “stand in the shadow of death, of exile and suffering” (ibid, 24.12–15). The thinking man does well to feel terror before so dire a fate. Death provides a release from these horrors. Every day we stand nearer the end; every hour urges us toward the bank from which we must fall. One should not be afraid to leave the present field of action (ibid, 120). Death is so far from being terrible that “by its grace all things lose their terrors.” For Seneca, it seems, life is what is terrifying, and death is what provides release (ibid, 24).

According to the younger Seneca, the events of earthly existence are paltry and not worth any emotional involvement. The questions of who wins the Battle of Pharsalus or an election are insignificant (ibid, 71). A person may leave the world if he feels that he has overstayed his welcome (ibid, 120). The human body is an unpleasantness to be endured only as long as one wishes, and when one thinks fit, one may dissolve the partnership with this puny clay (ibid, 65.22).

The Stoic felt bound by necessity and sought a sense of freedom and release. In this area, among others, the philosophy of Stoicism seems to suffer from a sort of constipation. One should escape from this life whenever she chooses, and she should die when the means are at hand: “Choose any part of nature and tell it to let you out” (ibid, 117.23–24). One should pick the means by which to quit life, for the option of suicide leaves the road to freedom open. To grumble is pointless since life holds no one fast. “Do you like life,

then live on. Do you dislike it? Then you're free to return to the place you came from" (ibid, 70.15). The philosopher may choose his own mode of death just as he chooses a ship or a house. He leaves life as he would a banquet—when it is time (ibid, 70.11; Plotinus, *On Suicide*, 1.9).

Seneca would not destroy himself merely to avoid pain, for the philosopher must be above pain: "I shall make my exit, not because of actual pain but because the pain is likely to prove a burr to everything that makes life worthwhile" (Seneca the Younger n.d., 58.36).² The person who dies because of pain is weak; the person who lives to suffer is a fool. Ultimately, a person is not trapped:

You see that yawning precipice? It leads to liberty. You see that flood, that river, that well? Liberty houses within them. You see that stunted, parched, and sorry tree? From each branch, liberty hangs. Your neck, your throat, your heart are so many ways of escape from slavery.... Do you inquire the road to freedom? You shall find it in every vein of your body. (Seneca 2010, *De Ira*, 3.15.3–4)

Seneca and his wife, Paulina, put these thoughts into action, calmly cutting their wrists at the order of the Emperor Nero, Seneca's former student. This consistency between thought and action was exemplified in the advice Seneca gave to the incurably ill Marcellinus, who was contemplating—and ultimately did commit—suicide.

Be not tormented, my Marcellinus, as if you were deliberating any great matter. Life is a thing of no dignity or importance. Your very slaves, your animals possess it in common with yourself, but it is a great thing to die honorably, prudently, bravely. Think how long you have been engaged in the same dull course: eating, sleeping, and indulging your appetites. This has been the circle. Not only a prudent, brave, or a wretched man may wish to die, but even a fastidious one. (Seneca the Younger n.d., *Ep.*, 77.6)

This rash of philosophical suicides seems to have been associated with a generally pessimistic view of human existence. The human being is not an exalted creation; and the gods are limited in power and not loving to man. Fear of the seemingly unavoidable changes in the cycle of life pushes people to destruction and oblivion, no matter how great their accomplishments are. There is a fatalistic preoccupation with the end of life in a hostile universe.

The works of ancient biographers such as Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius recount many historical suicide tales: Pythagoras, Socrates, Zeno, Demosthenes, the statesman Marc Antony, the stoic philosopher Seneca, and his wife Paulina. In addition, Graeco-Roman literature provides a number of examples of collective suicide in the ancient world, in which men slaughtered their families and then themselves (Cohen 1982).

The famous English poet John Donne ([1608] 1984) lists three pages of such historical suicides in his iconic work *Biathanatos*. Thus it is not surprising that some 16 suicides are described in the 26 surviving plays of Sophocles and Euripides alone. They are reflective of the suicidal tendencies of the Graeco-Roman society. At the end of this chapter, we will turn to an examination of suicide and self-destructive behavior in the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, and to a lesser extent Aeschylus. More of this later.

1.2. Suicide in the Biblical and Post-Biblical World

Judaism: Some contemporary suicidologists (e.g., Fedden 1938, p. 30; Alvarez 1970, p. 51; Shneidman 1985, p. 30) have argued that there is no specific anti-suicide teaching in the Hebrew Bible (Tanach)³. In the rabbinic view, however, Hebrew thought opposes not only suicide but also self-wounding. Judaism places the issue of suicide in terms of the larger context of views of life versus death. The Talmudic tradition condemns suicide as a most minutiae in the laws of Sabbath observance or animal sacrifices in the Temple occupy

² Also see (Seneca the Younger 1979). *Seneca*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

³ See the (Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures 1985).

far more space in the literature. For example, in the eight volumes of the *Aruch Hashulchan*, only one page covers the subject of suicide (*Yorah Deah*, 345).

The biblical basis for the Jewish injunction against suicide has been derived from the Noahide laws: “For your lifeblood too, I will require a reckoning” (Gen. 9:5). This statement has been seen as a prohibition not only against suicide but also against any form of self-mutilation (*Baba Kamma*, 91b, BT). The Hebrew Bible contains several additional prohibitions regarding self-mutilation, for example: “Ye are the children of the Lord your God: Ye shall not cut yourselves, nor make any baldness between your eyes for the dead” (Deut. 14:1). Much the same prohibition is given specifically to the priests in Leviticus: “They shall not make baldness upon their head, neither shall they shave off the corners of their beard, nor make any cuttings in their flesh” (Lev. 21:5).

The prohibition against suicide is clear in rabbinic law. For example, a suicide is not given full burial honors. Rending one’s garments and delivering memorial addresses and certain other rites to honor the dead are not performed for a suicide. The definition of a suicide, however, requires intent, full wits, non-deficiency in behavior, and non-inebriation (*Yorah Deah*, 345). There are also exceptions to the prohibition against suicide. According to the *Babylonian Talmud* 1975, *Sanhedrin*, 74a), one is obliged to accept death when the alternative is to be forced to commit adultery, murder, or idolatry. We should emphasize that this means allowing oneself to be killed under certain prescribed circumstances, not actively killing oneself. Jewish suicides have been reported in the non-rabbinic writings of the Second Temple period. When we turn to the Apocrypha (see In the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees, Eliezer runs beneath the elephant of an enemy general and thrusts his sword into it (1 Macc. 6:46). In 2 Maccabees, two acts of suicide are recorded: that of Ptolemy, and that of Ragesh (Razis). Ptolemy, a supporter of the Judeans at the Syrian Court is accused of treason and poisons himself (2 Macc. 10:12). Ragesh kills himself to avoid being captured by the Syrians., throwing himself from a wall and then disemboweling himself. (2 Macc. 14: 43–46).⁴ Flavius Josephus (1873) also mentions a number of suicides in *Wars of the Jews*, including the mass suicides at Jotapata in 69 C. E. and Masada in 73 C.E. However the later work of Joseph Ben Gurion (1956) questions this interpretation of the deaths of the people on Masada. (see the surveys of Kaplan and Schwartz 1993, 2008; Koch 2005; Shemesh 2009; Kaplan and Cantz 2017).

Although suicide per se typically is not valorized as it is in the Greek world⁵, there are instances where it can be permissible to avoid forced apostasy, or tortures that would be unbearable. One example is the death of the great Torah sage Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion. The Romans sentenced him to be burned to death, with a Torah scroll wrapped around him. To avoid hastening his death, ben Teradion keeps his mouth closed so that breathing the flames would not hasten his death. However, his Roman executioner is moved by the personhood of ben Teradion and asks his permission to remove the wet sponges from around Hanina’s heart designed to prolong his suffering. Hanina agrees, and the executioner removes the sponges and then jumps into the flames himself. Both Teradion and the executioner were rewarded with places in the world to come.

Another example of suicide in the Talmud is the story the 400 boys and girls who to avoid a life of prostitution in Rome, leaped into the sea (*Gittin*, 57b). A similar narrative can be found in *Lamentations Rabbah*, 1.45, where the basic principle is that if “they feared lest idol worshippers force them to sin by means of unbearable tortures, then it is commanded to destroy oneself” (*Tosafot, Avodah Zarah*, 18a; *Gittin*, 57b; see also Rabbi Jacob Emden). Another suicide in is that of Hannah after the martyrdom of her seven sons. *Avodah Zarah* 18b recounts the suicide of Beruria, the wife of Rabbi Meier.

Another Talmudic suicide involves the Hasmonean princess who was loved by her former slave, Herod who thought he heard a divine voice telling him that if he rebelled against his masters, he would succeed in marrying the princess. When she realized his

⁴ See the (*New English Bible, The, with the Apocrypha* 1970).

⁵ See (Kaplan and Schwartz 1993). *A Psychology of Hope: An Antidote to The Suicidal Pathology of Western Civilization*; (Kaplan and Schwartz 2008) *A Psychology of Hope: A biblical response to tragedy and suicide*

intentions, she threw herself off of a roof. (*Baba Batra*, 3b). In another incident, a father struck his son for receiving eggs intended for three guests during a famine. without permission. When the boy's mother saw what had happened, she ascended to the roof and fell down to the ground and died. When the father saw that both his son and his wife were dead he also ascended to the roof and jumped to his death (*Hullin* 94a).

Another passage relates the suicide of student was falsely besmirched by a prostitute (*Berachot*, 23a). The Talmud (*Semachot*, chaps. 2 and 5) also relates two incidents of childhood suicide, the first involving the son of Gornos of Lydda, who ran away from school, and the second, that of a child in Bnei B'rak, who broke a bottle on the Sabbath. Each child killed himself after his father threatened to punish him. Strikingly, neither death was ruled an intentional suicide.

Two more suicides are mentioned in the *Midrash Rabbah*. The first (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 10:7) describes a pagan eunuch of the emperor of Rome who attempted to embarrass Rabbi Akiba. When the eunuch was shamed in return, he killed himself. The second (*Genesis Rabbah* 65:22) describes the suicide of Jakum of Tzereth who, after taunting Rabbi Joseph Meshitha, inflicted as self-punishment the four modes of execution typically sentenced by the courts: he stoned, burned, strangled, and decapitated himself.

A good number of significant suicides occurred in later Jewish history as well, for example, hundred Jews at York in the twelfth century, hundreds in Verdun, France, in 1326, and many suicides in response to the Spanish Inquisition. While it is not our intention to create a laundry list here, there have been periods of external persecutions throughout Jewish history that have put Jews in the position of choosing apostasy or suicide ([Haberman 1946](#)). Durkheim's aforementioned observation on the comparatively higher rate of suicide among Jews in late nineteenth-century Bavaria and the suicides among Jews in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1930s and during World War II are also clearly connected to external forces. The importance of the theme of suicide in modern Yiddish literature has been explored in a work by Janet [Hadda \(1988\)](#), who has focused largely on suicidogenic family themes.

Famous Jewish suicides in modern times include that of Otto [Weininger \(2005\)](#), the self-hating Jewish intellectual who in 1903 shot himself in Ludwig van Beethoven's apartment; Ernst Toller, a playwright and revolutionary who killed himself in New York in 1939 in despair after the fall of Madrid to Francisco Franco; and Samuel Zygelbojm, who in 1943 committed suicide in London to protest the indifference of Polish, British, and other authorities to reports of the Holocaust and the savage destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. According to some accounts, Sigmund Freud, who was suffering from a painful and incurable illness, also took his own life.

The claim that there are no suicides in biblical and later Jewish history is thus obviously false. Individual suicides have occurred throughout Jewish history despite the injunctions against them. Nevertheless, suicide remains strongly prohibited in biblical and later Jewish thought, and when it has appeared within the culture, it typically has represented individual idiosyncrasies, impossible external situations, or profound Greco-Roman influences. The basic Jewish preference for life over death as expressed in the Hebrew Bible has never changed, nor has suicide ever been valorized.

However, the Jewish law on suicide is only one narrow aspect of a far wider and more important idea: that God loves humankind without qualification and indeed created humans in his own image. God has thus given the Torah to humans as a guide for living rather than merely as a preparation for death: "Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and mine ordinances, which if a man do, he shall live by them: I am the Lord" (Lev. 18:5). The same idea is constant throughout the Bible and the rabbinic writings. *Generally the Jewish position was opposed to suicide, but it tried not to stigmatize the person who died, often labelling a suicide as a nonmuricidal death.*

Christianity: Christianity is called the daughter religion of Judaism and is based partially on the same Hebrew Bible. One would thus expect it to demonstrate the same life-centeredness, belief in a loving God, and general repugnance toward suicide. One suicide

is recorded in the Christian New Testament, that of Judas Iscariot which we will discuss later. At the same time, Christianity grew up within the Greco-Roman world in which Judaism lived, and its leaders were influenced by pagan cults as well as Jewish apocalyptic movements, as well as a Platonic ambivalence toward life and death and even by the Stoic elevation of suicide disguised as a kind of martyrdom. Consequently, a part of Christianity blended intense eschatological excitement with the chronic depression of Greek philosophy. The Circumcelliones and the Donatists of the fourth century C. E. tended to engage in martyr suicides often seeking to provoke and even invite Romans to kill them.

Despite his insistence on the voluntary aspects of the death of Jesus, St. Augustine (354–438) strongly condemned suicide in the *City of God* as “a detestable crime and a damnable sin” (Augustine 1957, 1.27). He based this prohibition on his interpretation of Deuteronomy 5:17: “Thou shalt not kill” (1:20).¹⁵ He considered even the suicides of Judas Iscariot and of the Roman matron Lucretia to be evil, and he portrayed Jesus as urging flight from persecution rather than self-murder (1.17, 19, 22). One must not commit suicide out of magnanimity, because of physical violation of chastity, or to avoid future sin. Augustine declared his preference for the saintly Job over the suicidal Cato (1.24). He condemned dominant Donatist passion for quasi-martyrdom by suicide (cf. Willis 1950).

Christian thinking on suicide after Augustine reflected the political and legal changes from the Roman Empire to medieval Christendom. With the post-Constantinian success of Christianity, martyrdom, or dying for the faith, was no longer an issue as it had been within the old Roman Empire (though it remained so for Christian missionaries who sought to convert pagan tribesmen outside the boundaries of Christian civilization). The second Council of Orleans (533) produced the church’s first official disapproval of suicide by denying funeral rites to suicides who were accused of crimes. The Council of Braga (563) extended this ban to all suicides. In 590, the Council of Antisidor forbade the church to accept offerings for the souls of suicides.

Aquinas comes out strongly against suicide in his *Summa Theologica* (Aquinas [1485] 1981). Despite his argument that Jesus was the voluntary indirect cause of his own death (ibid, 3.47.1), Aquinas attempts to demolish pagan arguments for suicide. He reiterates Augustine’s argument from *City of God* (1.20) that associates suicide with murder (Augustine 1957, 2.2.64.5). Aquinas then adds three arguments of his own. First, suicide is unnatural: everyone bears an instinctive charity toward himself and should thus desire to do himself no harm. Suicide, being both unnatural and uncharitable, is a mortal sin. Second, an individual is a member of a social unit. Thus, Aquinas echoes the Aristotelian argument that suicide is antisocial. Third, life is the gift of God: though it is given, it remains God’s property; therefore, only God can pronounce the sentence of life and death: “I will kill, and I will make to live” (Deut. 32:39). *In summary, then, the Christian church slowly but surely formalized its opposition to suicide. Unlike Judaism, it sometimes stigmatized the suicide or even confiscated his property.*

Historical Views of Suicide in Western Society Let us begin with the Italian Dante Alighieri who lived between 1265 and 1320. In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante places the “violent against themselves” in the wood of the suicides in the second round of the seventh circle of Hell (Alighieri 1977). The souls of the suicides are encased in thorny trees where the leaves are eaten by harpies, causing their wounds to bleed. Only as long as the blood flows are the souls of the trees able to speak. They are permitted to speak only through that which injures and destroys them (Dante Alighieri 1977, *The Inferno*, canto 13).

In Germany, some centuries later, Immanuel Kant ([1785] 2011) argued strongly against suicide because he felt that it was incompatible with the affirmation of a universal law of self-love. At about the same time, however, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe ([1774] 2005) romanticized suicide in his novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Indeed, the publication of Goethe’s book was followed by a veritable epidemic of romantic suicides throughout Europe.

Many of the greatest names in French philosophy were sympathetic to suicide. Voltaire ([1733] 1925), for example, argued that at times suicide must be defensible, even though his own temperament was opposed to it. While regarding it as abnormal, he admit-

ted the possibility of its social and moral validity. Paul d'Holbach ([1770] 1821) strongly favored the permissibility of suicide on two grounds: first, suicide is not contrary to the laws of nature; second, suicide is not antisocial. The individual's contract with society is based on mutual benefit. Therefore, if society can give him nothing, the suicide has every right to consider the contract void. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, too, was sympathetic. The twenty-first letter in his *Nouvelle Héloïse* (Rousseau [1761] 1925) contains an extensive apologia for suicide from a young man disillusioned with life. Like d'Holbach, he says that first, suicide is not against the laws of nature: that is, it is up to us to leave life when it no longer seems good. Second, suicide is not akin to deserting one's post (see Plato's argument in chap. 2 below) but is like moving to a more hospitable town. Third, suicide does not remove one from the providence of God; it destroys one's body but not one's soul, which actually comes closer to God through death. Fourth, suffering sometimes becomes unendurable. Fifth, the scriptures have no word to say against suicide.

At the same time, France produced a great voice against suicide. Madame Anne Louise de Stael, in her essay *Reflections on Suicide* (de Stael 1814), reverses the support for suicide she had shown in an earlier essay she wrote, entitled *On the Influence of Passions* (de Stael 1796), by offering a threefold argument: first, pain serves to regenerate the soul, and thus to escape from pain through suicide is a refusal to recognize the possibilities of one's own nature; second, God never abandons the true believer, so there is no reason or right to commit suicide; finally, suicide is not consonant with the moral dignity of humankind.

The English poet and churchman John Donne ([1608] 1984) expresses a very different point of view in his classic work on suicide, *Biathanatos*. He argues that, under certain limited conditions, suicide might not be a sin: "[F]or we say... that this may be done only, when the Honor of God may be promoted by that way and no other" (ibid, p. 136). However, Donne did present a general plea for charity toward suicides, and he offered a proof that no set of rules can govern all instances (ibid, p. 145).

David Hume (1894) goes even further in *An Essay on Suicide*. For suicide to be criminal, he argues, it must be "a transgression of duty against God, one's self, or one's neighbors." That it cannot be the first stems from Hume's assertion that all our powers are received from our creator. Therefore, suicide can be no more ungodly than any other form of death. That suicide cannot involve a transgression against one's self seemed obvious to Hume, as no one has ever thrown away his life while it was worth keeping. That suicide does not involve transgression against one's neighbors was also obvious to him. For Hume, a person's 'obligations to do good to society,' are based on a norm of reciprocity. Therefore, as long as one receives benefit from society, one is obligated to work for its interests; but when one voluntarily withdraws from that society, one is released from that obligation.

A very different point of view was taken by an English clergyman named Adams at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In a publication entitled *An Essay Concerning Self-Murder*, Adams (1700) declares that human life belongs to God that He entrusts to humans only for a certain end. Therefore, human beings have no liberty to destroy it. Adams extends this viewpoint into the political realm. A person may hazard her life for her country, but she may not destroy herself for it. Another English clergyman, the Reverend Tuke, attempted to bridge this gap by differentiating between two kinds of suicide, one permissible and the other not.

There be two sorts of voluntarie deaths, the one lawful and honest such as the death of Martyrs, the other dishonest and unlawful, when men have neyther lawfull calling, nor honest endes, as of Peregrinus, who burnt himself in a pile of wood, thinking thereby to live forever in men's remembrance. (Tuke 1613, p. 21)

Views in contemporary Western society are similarly mixed. The American psychiatrist Thomas Szasz (1962, 1971) has attacked the view of suicide is *necessarily* a "manifestation of mental illness." Suicide, he has argued, "is a product of choice by an agent, not a symptom of disease." Szasz argues that, this choice" must be respected by psychiatrists,

police, and others who feel compelled to intervene to prevent it. To do otherwise involves the infantilizing and dehumanizing of the suicidal person."⁶

On the other side, an equally compelling anti-suicide position has been taken by Austrian psychiatrist Erwin Ringel, the founder of the International Association for Suicide Prevention. Ringel (1981) has argued that suicide cannot be freely chosen, and thus he opposes libertarian attitudes toward suicide, including those that would allow planned deaths for the terminally ill. Arguing that every human life is important, he presents the purpose of suicide prevention as the reinvigoration of human life—through the help of psychiatry and crisis intervention—for all human beings.

R. B. Brandt (1975) and Lebacqz and Englehardt (1977) have taken middle-ground positions. Brandt, a past president of the American Philosophical Association, has attempted to distinguish between rational and irrational suicide. His opinion is that a person may, on utilitarian grounds, reach a rational decision to take his life but that the rational decision process is often distorted by emotional disturbances. He has argued that intervention to prevent suicide may be justified if the decision is irrational one. However, if the decision is rational, such an intervention is not justified; furthermore, Brandt has even argued for an obligation to assist a person attempting a rational suicide. Lebacqz, a professor of Christian ethics, and Englehardt, a professor of the philosophy of medicine, have taken a slightly different approach. While acknowledging on libertarian grounds that people may have a *prima facie* right to commit suicide, they have maintained that this right is nonetheless usually overridden by contravening duties that grow out of our covenantal relationships with others. Still, there may be a right to suicide in at least three kinds of cases: voluntary euthanasia, covenantal suicide, and symbolic protest, for in these cases suicide would affirm the covenants we have with others.

These views, of course, represent only a sample of those existing in past and present Western society. However, they do reflect the confusion and vacillation with regard to many issues involving suicide. Is suicide to be viewed as mental illness, when judgment is, by definition, distorted and irrational, or can the choice be based on a rational decision? What implications would this definition have for mental-health professionals, religious leaders, and concerned laypeople? Should they respect an individual's "right to die" and even assist that person? Or are they morally bound to attempt to preserve life even against the expressed will of the potential suicide? To whom does an individual's life belong—to herself, to the state, or to God? Finally, how is suicide related to the basic idea of freedom? Suicide must be understood in the context of the larger issues of life and death and the historical antecedents to this problem.⁷

Much of the variation in the above attitudes towards suicide emerges from the anti-theoretical positions espoused by the two bedrock civilizations underlying much of western thought; that is, those of Athens and Jerusalem (see Lev Shestov [1937] 1966)

2. Suicide and Suicide Prevention Narratives in Greek Tragedy and the Hebrew Bible

The iniquitousness of suicide reflects ancient Greek and Roman writings is shocking. In the 26 surviving tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, we find 16 suicides/self-mutilations. In contrast, only six suicides emerge in the Hebrew Scriptures, and only one suicide in the Christian Scriptures). Even more importantly for our purposes, Scriptures present a number of suicide-prevention narratives that effectively provide psychological

⁶ This, of course, ignores the clinical evidence that the desire to end one life may represent a transient state.

⁷ Studies of the attitudes of African and Asian societies toward suicide also indicate variation (Bohannan 1960; Elwin 1943; Hankoff 1979; Thakur 1963; Yap 1958; Ohara 1961). India practiced *suttee*, the custom in which widows were placed on the funeral pyres of their husbands (Thakur 1963). Japanese history is filled with incidents of suicide, ranging from the traditional story of the forty-seven *ronin*, in which servants killed themselves *en masse* on their master's death, via the practice of *hara-kiri* or *seppuku* (conducted by the Samurai warriors), to the modern Kamikaze pilots, who dive-bombed to their deaths in World War II (Ohara 1961; Tatai and Kato 1974). Suicide in China has never been ritualized to the same extent as in Japan and has thus attracted less attention. Yet suicide has played an important role throughout Chinese history, and an astounding number of eminent men and women are reported to have taken their own lives. These suicides were often committed as expiation for violations of loyalties, even if they were committed inadvertently (Yap 1958; Lindell 1973; Rin 1975).

stoppers for people in despair. These stoppers do not appear in the writings of these Greek playwrights.

In his classic study *Le Suicide*, Durkheim ([1951] 1951) suggests three common types of suicide: *egoistic*, *altruistic*, and *anomic*. Egoistic suicides are people insufficiently bonded to the society around them. Altruistic suicides lack the autonomy to differentiate themselves from the surrounding milieu. Anomic suicides occur when there is confusion or disruption in an individual's relationship to the society around him. In addition, this work suggests a non-suicidal category (which Durkheim labels "religious") that unites the individual personality with society. Durkheim's thinking seems overly influenced by outmoded utopian idealism, and his reference to religion is vague. Nevertheless, he seems to be groping toward the possibility of a category where there is unity or congruence between *individuation* and *attachment*. We will employ this category in our analysis of two biblical suicides and label them "covenantal".

2.1. Suicides in Greek Tragedy

In his highly original work, M. D. Faber enumerates sixteen suicides and self-mutilations portrayed in the 24 surviving tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides. In Faber's view, these two great playwrights differ in their dramatization of the suicidal act and its underlying motivation.

Suicide in Sophocles is ordinarily an active, aggressive self-murderous act (Ajax, Oedipus, Jocasta, Haemon, Eurydice, Deianeira), an act which expresses anger toward significant others and guilt over the breakdown of the idealized self. The self-destructive behavior of Heracles and Antigone are the only exceptions and tend to be more like the suicides depicted by Euripides. For Euripides, suicide (Alcestis, Polyxena, Evadne, Macaria, Iphigenia, and Menoeceus, all women except the last) is a more passive, acquiescing, self-sacrificial act, an act in which anticipation for and anxiety regarding the future is more conspicuous than anger over loss or guilt for past deeds. (Faber 1970, pp. 93, 94)

For Sophocles, Faber argues, "suicide is a savagely aggressive act provoked by the need to expiate failure, to attack the significant other, to resurrect the good self by punishing the bad self, -in short, an act that announces the terrible toll human beings are prone to exact for themselves for what they have *done*, or for what they believe others have done," Euripides, in contrast "sees suicide as more passive, a phenomenon intimately bound up with the problem of *choice*, with the problem of allowing oneself to become a person who is unlike the person one imagines oneself to be by *doing* something "bad" or unacceptable, something that forces one to 'face up to' the truth of one's character'" (Faber 1970, pp. 93, 94).

For Faber, Sophocles' tragedies focus on guilt, Euripides on anxiety. "Sophocles sees suicide as a savagely "active aggressive self-murderous act (Ajax, Oedipus, Jocasta, Haemon, Eurydice, Deianeira', an act provoked by the need to expiate failure, to attack the significant other, to resurrect the good self by punishing the bad self, -in short, an act that announces the terrible toll human beings are prone to exact for themselves for what they have *done*, or for what they believe others have *done*. Euripides, in contrast, is preoccupied with suicide as a phenomenon intimately bound up with the problem of *choice*, with the problem of allowing oneself to become a person who is unlike the person one imagines oneself to be by *doing* something "bad" or unacceptable, something that forces one to face up to "the truth of one's character'. For Faber, Sophocles is a "playwright of *guilt*", Euripides, a "playwright of *anxiety*."

Whatever their motivation, four of Sophocles' eight suicides/self-destructive acts are male and can be classified as *egoistic* or *anomic*. Seven of Euripides's eight suicides/suicide

threats are women and can be classified either as *altruistic* or *anomic* (see Table 1)⁸. One additional suicide occurs in the plays of the third great Greek tragedian, Aeschylus.⁹

Table 1. Suicides in Greek Tragedy.

Character	Gender	Source	Method	Type
Ajax	M	Ajax (Sophocles 1938a)	Sword	Egoistic
Oedipus	M	Oedipus Rex (Sophocles 1938c)	Self-Blinding	Egoistic
Jocasta	F	Oedipus Rex (Sophocles 1938c)	Self-Hanging	Egoistic
Haemon	M	Antigone (Sophocles 1938b)	Sword	Egoistic
Eurydice	F	Antigone (Sophocles 1938b)	Knife	Egoistic
Deianera	F	The Trachinae (Sophocles 1938d)	Sword	Egoistic
Heracles	M	The Trachinae (Sophocles 1938d)	Self-Burning	Anomic
Antigone	F	Antigone (Sophocles 1938b)	Self-Hanging	Anomic
Hermione	F	Andromache (Euripides 1938b)	Suicidal Threats	Anomic
Phaedra	F	Hippolytus (Euripides 1938f)	Self-Hanging	Anomic
Evadne	F	The Suppliants (Euripides 1938i)	Self-Burning	Altruistic
Iphigenia	F	Iphigenia in Aulis (Euripides 1938g)	Allows Herself to be Killed by Axe	Altruistic
Menoceus	M	The Phoenissae (Euripides 1938h)	Jumps into Fire	Altruistic
Macaria	F	The Heracleidae (Euripides 1938e)	Allows Herself to Have Throat Cut	Altruistic
Polyxena	F	Hecuba (Euripides 1938d)	Allows Herself to Be Killed by Sword	Altruistic
Alcestis	F	Alcestis (Euripides 1938a)	Poisons Herself	Altruistic

2.2. Suicides in the Hebrew Bible

Whatever their motivation, these 16 Greek suicides/self-destructive behaviors number far more than the six suicides appearing in biblical narratives, all by men, and none in the Pentateuch. Chronologically, they are as follows: the self-stabbing of Abimelech (Judg. 9:54); the crushing of Samson (Judg. 16:30); the self-stabbing of Saul (1 Sam. 31:14; 2 Sam.

⁸ Oates and O'Neill (1938) is the source book for all the Greek tragedies.

⁹ In Aeschylus's *The Seven Against Thebes*, Eteocles, son of Oedipus and Jocasta, races into battle against his brother Polyneices and they kill each other at The Seventh Gate of Thebes. See also *The Bacchae* (Euripides 1938c).

1:6; 1 Chron. 10:4) and his armor-bearer (1 Sam. 31:15; 1 Chron. 10:5); the hanging of Ahitophel (2 Sam. 17:23); and the burning of Zimri (1 Kings 16:18).¹⁰ Please see Table 2.

Table 2. Suicides in the Hebrew Bible.

Character	Gender	Source	Method	Type
Saul	M	1 Sam. 31:4 2 Sam 1:6 1 Chron. 10:4	Self-Stabbing (Falls on Sword)	Covenantal
Saul's Armor Bearer	M	1 Sam. 31:5 1 Chron. 10:5	Self-Stabbing (Falls on Sword)	Altruistic
Ahitophel	M	2 Sam 17:23	Self-Strangling	Egoistic
Zimri	M	1 Kings 16:18	Self-Burning	Egoistic
Abimelech	M	Judg. 9:54	Self-Stabbing	Egoistic
Samson	M	Judg 6:30	Self-Crushing	Covenantal

Three (Ahitophel, Zimri and Abimelech) can be classified as egoistic, one as altruistic (Saul's armor bearer) and two as *covenantal*, a category we have created as an indicant of a sense of one's duty to a Higher Power (Samson and Saul).

Let us examine the three egoistic suicides first. Ahitophel, a counselor of King David, has joined Absalom's rebellion against the king. However, when he realizes that Absalom has been tricked into following a foolhardy plan certain to lead to defeat, Ahitophel sets his house in order and strangles himself:" (2 Sam. 17:23)

Zimri is also an egoistic suicide, with no obvious redeeming qualities. King Elah of Israel passes his days drinking in his palace while his warriors battle the Philistines. Zimri, a high-ranking officer, takes advantage of this situation, assassinates Elah, and mounts the throne. His reign, however, lasts only seven days. As soon as the news of King Elah's murder reaches the army on the battlefield, they pronounce General Omri to be king and lay siege to the palace. When Zimri sees that he is unable to hold out against the siege, he sets fire to the palace and perishes in the flames: "And it came to pass, when Zimri saw that the city was taken that he went into the castle of the king's house, and burnt the king's house over him with fire, and he died" (1 Kings. 16:18).

Abimelech's suicide is also egoistic. After carving out a principality for himself in Israel by means of various brutalities, he is mortally wounded by a millstone that a woman throws from a fortress he is besieging. Realizing that he is dying, Abimelech asks his armor bearer to finish him off so that it will not be said that a woman has killed him. This act qualifies him as an egoistic suicide.

And a certain woman cast an upper millstone upon Abimelech's head, and broke his skull. Then he called quickly to the young man, his armor-bearer, and said to him: "Draw your sword and kill me, lest men say of me, 'A woman killed him.'" So his young man thrust him through, and he died. (Judg. 9:53–57)

It is tempting to see Samson as the biblical equivalent of Sophocles' Ajax. Samson, like Ajax, has fallen from his previous state of leadership. Is he, too, using suicide to restore his lost image in the eyes of others? Closer examination indicates that Samson's suicide is not egoistic like that of Ajax: he is not alienated from his society but is very much a part of the people of Israel. However, I would argue that a fuller examination of the narrative of Samson's life suggests that he be categorized as a covenantal suicide.

We must remember that he had been blinded and publicly mocked by the Philistines. Faced with torture and death, Samson asked God for the strength to take as many Philistines with him as possible; when granted his request, he pulled down the central pillars of the temple of Dagon, killing thousands in one last blow: And Samson called to the Lord, saying, "O Lord God, remember me, I pray! Strengthen me, I pray, just this once."... And Samson

¹⁰ These are discussed at length in Kaplan and Schwartz (2008), *A Psychology of Hope*, Chapter 6, 107–113.

took hold of the two middle pillars which supported the temple, and braced himself against them, one on his right and the other on his left. Then Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines!” And he pushed with all his might, and the temple fell on the lords and on all the people who were in it. (Judg. 16:28–30)

A second covenantal suicide is that of King Saul. Rabbinic literature has regarded King Saul as a man of great stature, the anointed of the Lord. Yet, his reign was marked by series of mistakes, ending with his own suicide during a losing battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa. Saul has seen three of his sons and many of his fighters slain, and he himself is severely wounded. Surrounded by enemies and not wishing to be taken prisoner and exposed to the mockery and brutality of the Philistines, King Saul entreats his armor-bearer to kill him. The latter refuses, and Saul falls on his own sword: “Then Saul said to his armor-bearer: ‘Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised men come and thrust me through and abuse me.’ But his armor-bearer would not, for he was greatly afraid. Therefore, Saul took a sword, and fell on it” (1 Sam. 31:4).¹¹

The suicide of Saul’s armor-bearer can be classified as altruistic because of his seeming lack of differentiation from Saul: “And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword, and died with him” (1 Sam. 31:5). The biblical passage tells us that the armor-bearer first refuses to kill Saul and then falls on his own sword in response to Saul’s suicide. In a related narrative, an Amalekite comes to David and reports that he has assisted in Saul’s suicide; for this, David orders him killed (2 Sam. 1:9–10, 13–16). Commentaries have seen David as behaving correctly in condemning the Amalekite to death, even though the Amalekite was simply following Saul’s orders in assisting the latter to die (Ralbag on 2 Sam. 1:14).

There is no example of Durkheim’s anomic suicide in the Hebrew Bible; the six suicides seem to be either egoistic, altruistic, or covenantal. The most sympathetic rabbinic treatment is given to the altruistic (or perhaps covenantal) suicides (Samson and Saul). The harshest judgments are applied to suicides that seem clearly egoistic (Ahitophel, Zimri, and Abimelech)

The important point here is the far fewer number of suicides in the Hebrew Scriptures. Whatever their motivation, it is important to emphasize the 16 suicides in the 26 surviving plays of Sophocles and Euripides (or 17 if we include the 7 surviving plays of Aeschylus) in comparison to the much smaller number of 6 occurring in biblical narratives.¹²

2.3. Comparative Statistics of Greek versus Biblical Suicides

Let us now offer some comparative statistics based on the total number of characters in these two source documents

There are approximately 246 characters appearing in the 26 plays of Sophocles and Euripides, many in more than one play. This yields a suicide/self-destructive behavior rate of 16/236 or 6.8%. If we include the 41 characters depicted in the plays of Aeschylus as well, we tally 17 suicides out of 277 characters or a slightly lower suicidal behavior rate of 6.1%.

In contrast, some 2855 different people (2730 men and 125 women) are mentioned in the 39 books of the Hebrew Scriptures spanning a period of some 3330 years. Only six are identified as completed suicides (see Table 2 below), yielding an overall suicide rate of

¹¹ It can be argued that the deaths of Saul and Samson conform to the Graeco-Roman “noble death” tradition discussed by Droge and Tabor (1992). However, this is a disputable point failing to differentiate the Jewish and early Christian view of suicide. While the the early Christian view may have been ambivalent, the Jewish view does not seem to be in my estimation. The suicide of Samson, in particular can be seen more as an *altruistic* or even a *covenantal* suicide.

¹² As mentioned previously, only one suicide, Judas Iscariot appears in the Christian New Testament either by hanging (Matthew 27:5) or falling and bursting open (Acts 1: 18). Suicides also occur in the non-rabbinic writings of the Second Temple period as well, and also in later Talmudic writings, the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees, as well as in Josephus’ account of Masada as well as in later Jewish history (see the surveys of Koch 2005; and Shemesh 2009). No Talmudic passage can be taken as praising suicide or glorifying heroism in the Greek sense, nor is there an obsession with death as the solution to life’s problems or with the issue of control. Nevertheless, according to the Talmud, suicide can be permissible and even preferred in select instances in which a person is faced with forced apostasy or tortures that might be more horrifying than death. A fuller account can be found in Kaplan and Cantz (2017), *Biblical Psychotherapy*, Chapter 3, Footnote 8, pp. 69–71.

6/2855 or 0.02%, including none by women. If we limit our estimate of the total number of biblical characters to the 1778 identified by one title or another such as King Queen, Prophet, Judge Military Commander, etc. (Ziffer 2006), the suicide rate increases slightly to 6/1778 or 0.03%. Both of these rates are extraordinarily lower than the suicide rates emerging in Greek tragedy, whether we compare them to the sixteen suicides (6.8% suicide rates) for the 236 characters who appear in the 26 plays of Sophocles and Euripides (Chi-Squares = 133.13 and 80.03, p 's < 0.0001 in both cases) or to the 6.1% suicide rate for the 277 characters when we include the 7 plays of Aeschylus (Chi-Squares = 121.69 and 72.84, p 's < 0.0001 in both cases).¹³

2.4. Suicide Preventions in the Hebrew Bible

Perhaps even more to the point are the six suicide-preventing, indeed life-promoting narratives described in Scriptures. Job, for example, expresses a clear wish for suicide out of the depths of his affliction (Job 7: 15). Yet, Job does not commit suicide and indeed seems to recover his faith. "Though he slay me, yet I will trust in Him" (Job 13: 15). The prophet Elijah represents another example of suicide prevention. He clearly expresses a wish to die but recovers his strength after being given food and drink and is allowed to rest (1 Kings 19: 8). Moses expresses suicidal wishes to God when he is in the desert. Moses feels overwhelmed by his burdens which he feels he must shoulder alone (Numbers 11: 14–15). Once again, God successfully intervenes by offering Moses a chance to have his burden shared (Numbers 11: 16–17). Please see Table 3.

Table 3. Suicide Preventions in the Hebrew Bible.

Character	Gender	Source	Method
Elijah	M	1 Kings 18–19	Protected withdrawal and nurturance
Moses	M	Numbers 11	Support and practical advice
David	M	Psalms 22	Renewal of faith in God
Job	M	Job	Renewal of relationship with God
Rebecca	F	Genesis 27–28	Appropriate match-making for her son.
Jonah	M	Jonah	Protected withdrawal and guidance

In short, the Hebrew Scriptures present a number of suicide-prevention narratives largely absent in Greek writings. In other words, the Hebrew Scriptures seem to provide a psychological stopper for people in despair which seems unavailable to figures in the writings of the great Greek tragedians.

The remainder of this paper distills this information to develop a hands-on, practical approach to prevent suicide and indeed preventing them from reaching such a state in the first place. We have become convinced that ancient biblical narratives properly used in a psychologically sophisticated way can provide an anti-tragic view of life which can be usefully employed by the modern therapist or counselor in treating suicidal patients. Hope is central to our approach and the instilling of a positive life purpose (such as Job) rather than a destructive aimless search for meaning.

3. Seven Risk Factors for Suicide

Here, we present a brief literature review regarding seven empirically-based risk factors for suicide. (1) feeling depressed, isolated, and ignored, (2) feeling one's life is without purpose, (3) being a refugee from one's homeland, (4) feeling unable to express oneself with others, (5). feeling as an adopted child that one is unable to trust others (6).feeling abandoned by one's child leaving the family nest, and (7) feeling doomed by an

¹³ These are summarized in Kaplan and Cantz, *Biblical Psychotherapy*, p. 67

incestuous family history. We summarize a small sample of the research literature on each of these risk factors below.¹⁴

3.1. *Feeling Depressed, Isolated and Ignored*

Feeling isolated and ignored can leave one helpless and hopeless which can in turn lead to suicidal behavior. Durkheim ([1951] 1951); Dublin (1963) and Pretzel (1972) have summarized the sociological literature highlighting the importance of social isolation as a risk factor for suicide. Choron (1972) emphasized loneliness as a principal cause of suicide and suggested that it is often the psychological make-up of the suicidal individual which prevents the establishment of healthy individuals. More recently Daniel and Goldston (2012) have emphasized that a lack of connectedness to others along with a pervasive sense of hopelessness are two of the most significant risk factors associated with increased rate of suicidal thoughts and behaviors across the lifespan. Martiello and Giacchi (2012) found a positive correlation between suicide and measures of economic deprivation and social fragmentation for both men and women. Calear et al. (2014) found that individuals experiencing suicidal ideation had more negative attitudes toward help-seeking and lower intentions to seek help.¹⁵

3.2. *Feeling One's Life Is without Purpose*

Feeling that one's life is without meaning or purpose is a terrible problem in modern society, leading the eminent psychiatrist and thinker Victor Frankl (1962) to comment that, "There is nothing in the world . . . that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions, as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life" (p. 126). The work of Abramson et al. (1978) and Peterson and Seligman (1984) and Peterson et al. (1998) reported a "catastrophizing" explanatory style for the causality of bad events that predicted mortality, especially among males, and predicted accidental or violent deaths especially well (also see ¹⁶).

My colleagues and I (Kaplan et al. 2008a, 2008b) have studied the relationship between purposelessness and suicidality. In the absence of an inherent purposive structure of life, undergraduate students in a search for meaning tended to catastrophize and generalize singular negative hypothetical events with which they were presented. Further, this tendency tended to be linked with greater levels of depression and hence more positive attitudes towards suicide, and physician-assisted suicide for both men and women.

Kleiman and Beaver (2013) have more recently found that presence of meaning in life accurately predicted decreased suicidal ideation as well as lower lifetime chances of attempted suicides. This line of research has been supported by findings by Heisel et al. (2015), who likewise concluded that there is a growing body of knowledge suggesting that establishing a personal meaning in life contributes not only to general mental wellness and, but also potentially decreases future incidents of suicidal contemplations later in life.

As the reader will become aware, the present paper makes a sharp distinction between *searching for meaning* (which can be very suicidal) and *living with purpose* -which is not.

3.3. *Being a Refugee from One's Homeland*

Experiencing oneself as a refugee or an outcast can deprive a person with the ability to creatively deal with adverse and even life-threatening situations. Refugees and other asylum seekers tend to experience a significantly higher rate of mental health issues, often surviving or being witness to a variety of physical and psychological trauma (Silove et al. 2007). Experiencing oneself as a refugee or an outcast can deprive a person with the ability to creatively deal with adverse and even life-threatening situations. Refugees

¹⁴ A much more extensive list of relevant studies is presented in Kaplan and Cantz (2017), *Biblical Psychotherapy*. Chapter 4, 73–99.

¹⁵ Also see the work of Shaffer (1974).

¹⁶ Also see the work of (Seligman and Csikszentmihaly 2000) *Positive psychology: An introduction*.

and other asylum seekers tend to experience a significantly higher rate of mental health issues, often surviving or being witness to a variety of physical and psychological trauma.

As World War II ended (1946), the population of Hong Kong was just over 1,000,000; by 1955 it had almost doubled and it was estimated that a third of the residents were recent political refugees. Using hospital and police records, [Yap \(1958\)](#) showed that the annual suicide rate rose from a low figure of 3 per 100,000 in 1946 to 12 per 100,000 in 1955.

A later study by [Alley \(1982\)](#) investigated suicidal tendencies among a sample of 4192 Indochinese refugees to America who had undergone the turmoil of war, the risking of one's life, and the forced separation of families and relocation. Clinical findings revealed that multiple determinants were operating conjointly in creating the high risk of any particular refugee in relation to suicide ([Skodlar and Parnas 2010](#)).

In a still more recent study, [Ponizovsky et al. \(1999\)](#) reported a significantly higher 6-month prevalence rate of suicide ideation among Russian Jewish immigrant adolescents to Israel (10.9%) than among a comparable sample of Jews remaining in Russia (3.5%). Also see the work of [Silove et al. \(2007\)](#) regarding the mental health of trauma-affected refugees seeking asylum in Australia.

3.4. Feeling Unable to Express One's Own's Self with Others

The profound disillusionment that accompanies feeling unable to be oneself with others can lead to an endless cycling between plunging into a relationship because of loneliness and leaving that same relationship because of boredom, and a feeling that one cannot be oneself. This lack of interaction with peers may be especially harmful to school age children ([Barker and Wright 1955](#)) as compared to 2-year-olds ([Calhoun and Morse 1977](#)). The same problem occurs in adolescence as well ([Gould et al. 1996](#); [Shaffer 1974](#)) of what should come as little surprise, amongst completed suicides, depression is the most common psychiatric disorder present, occurring in half to two thirds of cases ([Rich et al. 1986](#); [Henriksson et al. 1993](#); [Conwell et al. 1996](#); [Harwood et al. 2001](#)).

A recent study and review article by [Skodlar et al. \(2008\)](#) and by [Skodlar and Parnas \(2010\)](#) points to two main risk factors for suicidal ideation in their sample of schizophrenia patients and in several other studies ([Inskip et al. 1998](#); [Palmer et al. 2005](#); [Rossau and Brøbech 1997](#); [Nyman and Jonsson 1986](#); [Wiersma et al. 1998](#)). The first precipitant is solitude with the inability to participate in human interactions, and the second is feelings of inferiority. In a follow-up study, [Skodlar and Parnas \(2010\)](#) reported that these two factors were associated with disturbances measured by the Examination of Anomalous Self-Experience scale, that is, disorder of self-awareness and self-presence.

In a somewhat older review of the literature, the author ([Kaplan and Worth 1993](#)) proposed a model wherein a leading cause of suicidal impulses was an inability to successfully integrate self and other, and that this may persist across the life span. The maturation process relies on successful integration of attachment and individuation (c.f. [Ainsworth 1972](#); [Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1977](#)) at each life stage as a precondition to proceed to the next more developed stage ([Kaplan and O'Connor 1993](#); [Kaplan and Worth 1993](#)). For a suicidal person, one either loses his/her own identity or attachment to others. Such a choice is very disintegrative and occurs across the life span.

3.5. Feeling as an Adopted Child That One Is Unable to Trust Enough to Seek or Accept Help

Depression, impulsivity, and aggression during adolescence have been associated with both adoption and suicidal behavior. In a landmark secondary analysis on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, [Slap et al. \(2001\)](#) report that attempted suicide is more common among adolescents who live with adoptive parents than among adolescents who live with biological parents. This association persists after adjusting for depression and aggression and is not explained by impulsivity as measured by a reported tendency to quickly make decisions.

In a more recent study, [Anderson \(2011\)](#) reports that child youth who enter the child welfare system and are put in an out-of-home placement can aggravate the existing health

problems and may be at an increased risk for developing depressive symptoms, which has been shown to increase the risk for suicidal ideation. Being put in an out of home placement can aggravate and even compound existing psychological maladies (Harden 2004; Newton et al. (2000). Elevated risk of mental health outcomes such as depression continues due to the unusual stresses inherent in their situation, namely frequent relocations and temporary to prolonged separation from family of origin (Rubin et al. 2004, 2007; Taussig et al. 2001).

3.6. *Feeling Abandoned by One's Child Leaving the Family Nest*

The parental experience of children leaving home has been labelled the “empty nest” syndrome and can have important implications for one’s mental health. The shift from daily parenting and a “full nest” to an “empty nest” can be a startling one. Clinicians have observed a “temporal though not necessarily causal, relationship between the termination of child rearing and clinical depression” (Deykin et al. 1966). Bart (1971) reported that middle-age women in psychiatric hospitals stated that they had become depressed with their child leaving home, particularly those who had been over-involved in the mother role and who were not employed outside the house.

3.7. *Feeling Doomed by an Incestuous Family History*

Experiencing seductive advances from one’s parent can adversely affect an individual for the rest of his life. Several studies specifically point to the role of parental seductiveness on subsequent child and adolescent suicidality (Dwivedi 1993; Dutton and Yamini 1995; Eagle 2003; Kagan 2009). The physical and sexual abuse of children along with neglect have commonly been considered valid ways of measuring family dysfunction (Smyth and MacLachlan 2004).

The occurrence of child abuse and neglect as a predisposing factor to suicidality in adolescents is commonly found (Brockington 2001; Lange et al. 1999; Oates 2004), especially amongst runaway and homeless youth (Kidd 2007; Rew et al. 2001). This holds especially true for homeless adolescence, with Plunkett et al. (2001) finding that sexual abuse and suicidality were highly correlated.

4. Matching Biblical and Graeco-Roman Narratives for These Seven Risk Factors

We then matched well known biblical versus Graeco-Roman narratives for each of these seven risk factors.¹⁷

(a) Feeling depressed and isolated (the Ajax Syndrome/the Elijah Resolution), (b) Feeling one’s life is without purpose (the Zeno syndrome/the Job Resolution); (c) Being a refugee from one’s homeland (the Coriolanus Syndrome/the David Resolution), (d) Feeling unable to express oneself with others (the Narcissus Syndrome/ the Jonah Resolution) (e) Being adopted (the Oedipus Syndrome/the Moses Resolution); (f) Feeling abandoned by one’s child leaving the family nest (The Phaedra Syndrome/ the Rebecca Resolution); and (g) Feeling doomed by a dysfunctional (indeed incestuous) family of origin (The Antigone Syndrome/ the Ruth Resolution) The Greek and biblical narratives regarding each of these factors, demonstrating how Greek narratives lead to self-destructive behaviors while biblical narratives provide a safe way out these dilemmas.

Each of these life conditions can be seen as a stressor or risk factor with regard to suicide. However, people may differ in their vulnerabilities to these stressors (c.f. Zubin and Spring 1977). Exogeneous and/or endogenous challengers elicit a crisis in all humans

¹⁷ In the name of transparency I would like to emphasize to the reader that I am not formally trained in either classics or biblical-rabbinic thought. I am a social-clinical psychologist who has specialized in cultural differences in attitudes towards suicide and approaches to suicide prevention. I have been struck by the fact that biblical-rabbinic and ancient Graeco-Roman narratives have portrayed suicide and suicide-prevention so very differently. In this regard, I am a Fellow in the American Psychological Association and have received previous awards from the International Fulbright program at Tel Aviv University as well as an award (Grant # 12457) from the John Templeton Foundation at the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Medicine to study and write about this question. I have been Associate editor and then Editor of the Journal of the Psychology and Judaism and a Fellow in the American Psychological Association. I more recently received an award in 2016–2017 from the Portes Foundation Grant: *Identifying Longitudinal Psychiatric Risk Factors for Suicide and Suicide Prevention*.

but depending on the intensity of the elicited stress and the threshold for tolerating it, that is, one's vulnerability, the crisis will either be contained homeostatically, or lead to an episode of disorder. In other words, a given stressor may overwhelm the defenses of a highly vulnerable person but be successfully navigated by someone who is not so vulnerable.

4.1. Feeling Depressed and Isolated: Treating the Ajax Syndrome with the Elijah Intervention

Here, we compare the Greek suicide story of Ajax with the biblical suicide-prevention story of Elijah with regard to the stressor of being isolated.

The Ajax Syndrome: After Achilles has died, in the Trojan War, the Greek leaders against Troy give Odysseus to inherit his arms, rather than Ajax. Ajax goes berserk, feeling his honor has been stained. Ajax sets out to murder Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek forces and his brother Menelaus. The goddess Athena feels she has not been properly appreciated by Ajax and sets out to ruin him. First she makes Ajax mad. In his madness, Ajax slaughters sheep in the army's flocks, and leads others to his tent, thinking that he is killing/ the Greek leaders who have snubbed and dishonored him. Recovering from his madness, Ajax becomes dangerously despondent into his tent, not disguising his suicidal thoughts.

Ajax cries, something he had always refused to do as it "befitting cowards only" (The Ajax, [Sophocles 1938a](#), l. 320). Ah me, the mockery", he cries, "To what shame am I brought" (l. 365). Ajax is paralyzed by what has happened to him and sees no way out other than taking his own life. He has received no positive support from others. His brother Teucer only belatedly sends a message to the Greek chieftains ordering that Ajax not leave his tent alone—but it is too late. Ajax has already left his tent alone and has fallen on his sword (Ajax, [Sophocles 1938a](#), ll.748–755, 848–849, 865).

The Elijah Intervention: The narrative of Biblical prophet Elijah provides a diametrically opposite guide of how to treat a depressed and suicidal person. In the midst of an ongoing conflict with Jezebel who wants to kill him (*I Kings* 19: 1–2). Elijah feels overwhelmed He states he is y unable to and expresses a wish to die (*I Kings* 19: 3–4). God hears his prophet Elijah and sends an angel to him to provide Elijah with food and drink and provides a secure resting place for him (*I Kings* 19: 5–8). This enables Elijah to recovers his strength. Rested and nurtured, Elijah is now empowered to proceed on to Mt. Horeb with the help of young Elisha (*I Kings* 19: 15–18).

These two narratives are contrasted in Table 4, below.

Table 4. Elijah against Ajax.

Stage	Ajax	Elijah
1 Precipitating Stressor	Ajax is humiliated by both Agamemnon and Athena	Elijah is harassed and threatened by Queen Jezebel
2 Reaction	Ajax expresses a desire to die	Elijah expresses a desire to die
3 Response of Others	Ajax is allowed to leave his tent alone.	Elijah is sent an angel who bring him food, drink and companionship and lets him rest.
4. Effect	Ajax kills himself by falling on his sword	Elijah recovers his strength and continues his mission in Horeb and is given the younger Elisha to help him.

4.2. Feeling One's Life Is without Purpose: Treating the Zeno Syndrome with the Job Intervention

Here, we compare the Greek suicide narrative of Zeno in response to a minor stressor and the biblical suicide-prevention story of Job with regard to a much larger calamity.

The Zeno Syndrome: Zeno, founder of the Stoic school of philosophy, wrenched his toe on the way home from lecturing at the *Stoa* (porch). He catastrophizes this objectively minor mishap as a "sign from the gods that he should depart" and voluntarily holds his breath until he dies (Diogenes [Laertius 1972](#), 7.28). Zeno's over-interpretation may represent his attempt to find meaning in an otherwise hopeless and meaningless world.

Of course, breathing is involuntary, Thus it is medically impossible to hold one's breath till one dies. One will pass out and begin to breathe again. This makes the portrayal of Zeno's death the poster child of the Stoic view of freedom discussed in the previous section of this paper

Like other Greek and Roman stoics, Zeno needs to control the conditions around his death, equating this control with a tragically tinged sense of freedom (Seneca 2010, De Ira, 3.15.34, Epictetus 1885, Discourses, 1.29).

The Job Intervention: Job, in contrast, does not commit suicide despite being confronted with more serious calamities—the loss of his wealth, his family, and his health. If this was not bad enough, his wife tells him to curse God and die (Job 2: 9). Then, his so-called friends tell him to admit he must have acted in such a way to deserves his punishment. However, Job knows this is not true, and he refuses (Job 4–32). Job certainly complains bitterly deeply grieved and indeed wrestles with suicide, indeed stressing the same method of death, *strangling*, as did Zeno. “So that my soul chooseth strangling, and death, rather than these bones.” (Job 7: 15). However, Job does not act on this feeling, reaffirming his relationship with his Creator: “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him” (Job 13: 15). Job is anchored in a sense of a personal Creator who is with him from the moment of his birth and will be with him into his death and beyond. He thus an withstand far greater misfortune than can Zeno without the need to attribute cosmic meaning to it.¹⁸

In contradistinction to Zeno who is improbably described as “holding his breath until he dies,” the book of Job stresses that it is God himself that has given Job the breath of life. “The spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of the Almighty giveth me life.” (Job 33: 4). If He withdraws that breath, man returns to the dust from which he sprung (cf. Psalms 104:29). When God restores the breath, man rises again and renews the face of the earth. “Thou sendest forth Thy spirit, they are created; and Thou renews the face of the earth.” (Psalms 104:30)

Life for Job has inherent purpose and unlike Zeno, does not need to catastrophize a relatively minor mishap in a desperate search for meaning (see Kaplan 2020).

A contrast of these two narratives is presented in Table 5, below.

Table 5. Job against Zeno.

Stage	Zeno	Job
1. Precipitating Stressor	Zeno the Stoic wrenches h toe returning from giving a lecture at the Stoa.	Job unexpectedly loses his property, his children, and his health.
2 Reaction	Zeno interprets this as a sign from the gods he should depart.	Though Job complains, he maintains his faith in God despite his misfortunes.
3. Response of Others	No mention is made of reaction of others	Job's friends tell him that he must be guilty, and his wife tells him to curse God and die. However, Job maintains his innocence.
4. Effect	Zeno immediately holds his breath until he dies.	Job steadfastly insists on his his innocence while maintaining his faith in God. He is ultimately restored.

4.3. Being a Refugee: Treating the Coriolanus Syndrome with the David Intervention

The Roman story of Coriolanus and the biblical story of David can be contrasted with regard to dealing with the experience of exile and being a refugee from one's homeland.

The Coriolanus Syndrome. Roman historians (see Plutarch 1909, 1932; and Livius (1960) as well as Shakespeare (2014a) all tell of the legendary Roman commander Gnaeus Marcius whose military valor at Corioli against the Volsci, the enemies of Rome in the 5th century B.C.E., won him the honorary name of Coriolanus. For Plutarch, Marcius as a man of great energy but also with such a violent temper, that he is unable to cooperate with others. After his brilliant heroism in defeating the Volsci, Marcius finds

¹⁸ Exline et al. (2012) point to the importance of arguing within a relationship without leaving it.

himself enmeshed in angry arguments between the patricians and plebeians in Rome. His outspoken insults to the plebeians lead to his banishment and almost his execution, despite his salutary military victories

Marcus (Coriolanus) becomes obsessed with wreaking revenge on Rome, and defects to these very Volsci, enemies of Rome, whom he persuades to attack Rome. As Marcus' Volsci army sits camped before Rome, two delegations came from the city but are unable to persuade him to desist. Marcus's mother (Volumnia) and his wife and children then lead a delegation of Roman women in imploring him to stop. Marcus relents and withdraws the Volsci army. The historian Plutarch says that Coriolanus was murdered by the Volsci shortly after this withdrawal. Another historian, though not a suicide story per se, there is no question that the rigidity of Coriolanus helped provoke his death.¹⁹

The David Intervention David was also a war hero, but of a very different sort. He initially is portrayed as young shepherd boy, playing the lyre for King Saul to alleviate the latter's depression. He subsequently slays the Philistine giant Goliath not by brute strength but through agility and the use of a simple slingshot. He is greatly loved by the people which provokes the jealousy of Saul who tries to kill him. David flees his native Israel with a band of men to live under the Philistines, longtime foes of Israel (I Samuel 27). Yet here his similarity to Marcus ends. David flees not because of conflict with his countrymen but to save his life from King Saul's jealous anger against him.

Unlike Coriolanus David is not described as a rigid perfectionist but as deeply human. Even in exile, David does not turn from his love of Israel, despite Saul's jealous rage towards him. In the period that David and his troop live among the Philistines, he leads their troops in war against common enemies of Israel and the Philistine. As his not fully trusted, David is spared the conflict of having to fight for the Philistines in a decisive battle against Israel (1 Samuel 29: 6–11). David becomes King of Israel after Saul's death in this battle. As king, David (2 Samuel 6: 12–23) does not show contempt towards the common people as Coriolanus did to the plebeians in Rome. Rather, when the ark is brought into Jerusalem, David dances with the people even though this earns him the contempt of his wife Michal., daughter of Saul.

These two narratives are contrasted in Table 6, below.

Table 6. . David against Coriolanus.

Stage	Coriolanus	David
1. Precipitating Stressor	Coriolanus, a Roman military hero, needlessly antagonizes his countrymen and is exiled from Rome.	David, a military hero in Israel, must flee to escape Saul's murderous jealousy and wrath
2 Reaction	Coriolanus joins the Volsci, the enemy of Rome, in order to avenge himself against Rome.	David joins the Philistines, the enemy of Israel, for survival but maintains his love of Israel.
3. Response of Others	The Romans fear Coriolanus will lead the Volsci against Rome. However, he is still not trusted by the Volsci and ultimately does not attack Rome.	David avoids fighting against his beloved Israelites, attacking instead common enemies of Israel and the Philistines.
4. Effect	Coriolanus withdraws the Volsci from attacking Rome but remains condescending and insulting to the Volsci who murder him.	David is spared fighting against the Israelites and is this able to be loyal both to King Achish of the Philistines and to Israel David subsequently becomes King of Israel

4.4. Feeling Unable to Express Oneself with Others: Treating the Narcissus Syndrome with the Jonah Intervention

Here, we compare the Greek suicide story of Narcissus with the biblical suicide-prevention story of Jonah with regard to the importance of being able to know and be oneself with others.

¹⁹ Livy, another historian of this period, cites a somewhat different account of Coriolanus living in miserable exile for many years.

The Narcissus Syndrome

The earliest sources of the myth of Narcissus have long since been lost. Our most complete account from antiquity is in Ovid (1989)'s *Metamorphoses* (cs. 43 BCE to 17 CE). Narcissus is described as being born out of a rape of his mother Liriope by Cephisus, a river god. When Liriope enquires from the Greek seer Tiresias about whether her son will live to a ripe old age she receives a strange answer: He [Narcissus] will live a long life as long as he does not come to know himself (ibid, 3, ll. 343–50).

Narcissus grows to be so physically beautiful that many fall in love with him by simply looking at him. (ibid, ll. 359–78). However, he Narcissus is completely self-absorbed, treating lovers of both sexes as mere mirrors of himself. Echo, the nymph who loves Narcissus in vain, is transformed, left merely repeating the words he says—as an echo (ibid, ll. 379–52). One scorned lover prays to the god of fate, Nemesis, that Narcissus too fall hopelessly in love and be unable to achieve his desire. (ibid, ll. 405–6). Soon, Narcissus sees a beautiful youth in a pond, not realizing it is his own reflection. Narcissus is obsessed with the image in the brook, and looks at it day and night (ibid, ll. 414–54).

Ultimately, however, Narcissus recognizes the face in the brook is his (ibid, ll. 463–73). The reflection becomes simultaneously an ideal and a mirror.²⁰ He is not self-invested, but self-empty, driven to grasp his self, which has now been projected onto the outside world. This psychotic juxtaposition rips Narcissus apart. As Ovid expressed it, “How I wish I could separate myself from my body” Narcissus finally becomes aware of the unobtainability of the figure he sees in the pond—it is his own reflection. According to the accounts, he now kills himself, either through passively pining away Ovid (ibid, ll 497–50) or as actively stabbing himself in his chest (Conon 1798, *Narrationes*, p. 24).

The Jonah Intervention. The story of Jonah begins with God calls on Jonah to go to the people of Nineveh to warn them of their wickedness. Jonah does not want to go, but he is too God-fearing to defy the command and too strong-willed to submit. In desperation he flees to Tarshish, but God sends a great storm after him. At first Jonah tries to hide himself and his identity in the bottom of the ship, but when he and his identity are discovered, he instructs his shipmates to throw him overboard (Jonah 1: 1–12). The story could thus end in Jonah's suicide, but it does not—God as a protective parent, saves Jonah's life by swallowing Jonah in the stomach of a great fish (perhaps a womb) Jonah prays to God from the belly of the fish until he becomes stronger. Only then does the great fish vomits him out on dry land (Jonah 2).

This pattern repeats itself. God again commands Jonah to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah overcomes his reluctance and does go and gives the people of Nineveh God's message. They repent and are saved (Jonah 3: 1–10). However, Jonah becomes angry and again expresses the wish to die and to goes on the outskirts of the city (Jonah 4: 1–3). Again, God intervenes, sheltering Jonah with a leafy bush from the burning sun (Jonah 4: 6). However, a worm destroys the protective bush, and Jonah again expresses suicidal thoughts (Jonah 4: 7–8). Once more God intervenes, this time engaging Jonah in a dialogue to teach him the message of *teshuvah* (repentance) and divine mercy and that he can reach out to another without losing himself (Jonah 4: 9–11). Biblical thinking sees self and other in harmony. Jonah avoids the polarities of disengagement and enmeshment. In the words of the biblical sage, Hillel, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?” (*Pirke Aboth* 1962, 1: 14).

These two narratives are contrasted below in Table 7.

²⁰ See Heinz Kohut (1971)'s distinction between *mirroring* and *idealizing narcissism*.

Table 7. Jonah against Narcissus.

Stage	Narcissus	Jonah
1. Precipitating Stressor	Narcissus is born of a rape of his mother Leirope by the river god Cephisus He is prophesized to have a long life as long as "he does not come to know himself."	God asks Jonah to go and warn the wicked people of Nineveh to repent lest they avoid great punishment. Jonah does not want to go and runs away to Tarshish to avoid the conflict.
2. Reaction	The beautiful Narcissus heartlessly exhibits hubris by rejecting would be lovers of both genders.	God sends a great storm when Jonah is on a ship. First he hides in the bottom of the shift. However, when his identity as a Hebrew is discovered, he tells his shipmates that he is the reason for the storm and asks his shipmates to throw him overboard. However, rather than let Jonah drown, God sends a big fish to swallow him, thus allowing him to recover his strength.
3. Response of Others	Narcissus is brought down by Nemesis and becomes completely infatuated with a face he encounters in a brook.	After the fish vomits out the restored Jonah unto dry land, God again asks him to go to Nineveh to warn its inhabitants to repent and change their ways.
4. Effect	Narcissus realizes the face in the brook is his own reflection, and thus unobtainable. He commits suicide, either in a passive (pining away) or active (stabbing himself) manner, depending on the source.	Jonah warns the people of Nineveh but becomes suicidal again and sits outside the city walls under a hot sun. God again protects Jonah with a large gourd. Ultimately God removes the gourd, and in addressing Jonah's complaint, teaches him the lesson of mercy and compassion—that he need not lose himself in reaching out to others.

4.5. Being Adopted: Treating the Oedipus Syndrome with the Moses Intervention

Let us compare the Greek suicide/ self-mutilation story of Oedipus with the biblical suicide-prevention story of Moses regarding addressing the suicidal implications of being adopted.

The Oedipus Syndrome. Laius, King of Thebes, hears from an oracle that his newborn son Oedipus will murder him and marry his wife when/reaches adulthood. Along with his wife, Jocasta, he instructs a servant to expose the baby to die in one of their fields. However, Oedipus is saved by another herdsman and brought to King Polybus of Corinth and his wife the Dorian Meirope who raise him as their own son. Oedipus's life seems to be going smoothly until, as a young man, a man questions his identity at a dinner party. He questions King Polybus and Queen Meirope as to the veracity of what he has heard, but they assure him that he is their son. Unsure, Oedipus travels to Delphi to consult the Oracle (the Pythia) to inquire about the identity of his natural parents. The Oracle does not answer this question but instead prophesies that he is destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Thinking this refers to Polybus and Meirope, Oedipus returns to Corinth to collect his belongings and immediately flees to Thebes to avoid this horrendous prophecy. Along the way he has an altercation with an older man over right of way at a place where three roads meet. The older man strikes him, and in the resulting struggle, Oedipus strikes the older man and kills him. The older man is Laius, but Oedipus does not know this Oedipus.

Continuing on to Thebes, Oedipus encounters a fearsome creature called a Sphinx, a fearsome creature perched on a cliff with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle. who is terrorizing and killing travelers who cannot answer his riddles. Oedipus successfully answers her riddle, leading the Sphinx to throw herself to her death. As a reward for his bravery in saving Thebes, Oedipus is given the widowed Queen Jocasta as a wife as a reward, and he becomes King of Thebes. He begets four children with her, not realizing he is involved in an incestuous relationship.

Life seems to be proceeding nicely, until a plague arrives in Thebes. Trying to find the reason for the plague, Oedipus attempts to enlist the aid of his brother-in-law Creon (who is his uncle unbeknownst to Oedipus) and then from the prophet Teiresias. However, Oedipus does not really seem to be able to solicit, trust or accept help from anyone, being done in by riddles from the Oracle of Delphi, convoluted responses from the prophet Teiresias, and mistrust of his brother-in-law Creon. Nowhere does Oedipus receive any real help

he can fully trust, certainly not from his sons Polyneices and Eteocles who subsequently slay each other at the Seventh Gate of Thebes. The sole exception is his daughter Antigone. (Sophocles 1938c, *Oedipus Rex*; Aeschylus 1938, *the Seven against Thebes*).

The Moses Intervention For Moses also, birth brought danger of death. His life is threatened by Pharaoh's decree to throw all males born among the Israelites into the Nile River. To save his life, Moses is placed in an ark by his natural family when he is 3 months old. He is rescued by Pharaoh's daughter who sees him floating in the river and brings him into the house of Pharaoh himself and raises him herself. Significantly Moses' sister Miriam watches from a distance to remain aware of how he is being treated.

Moses does not consciously attempt to seek clues about his destiny but the account of Moses going among his Hebrew "brethren" one can see his latent identification. First, Moses sees an Egyptian attacking a Hebrew man and kills him (Exodus 2: 11–12). Moses subsequently chances upon a "burning bush" where he encounters the Hebrew God, who informs him of his mission to save the Children of Israel from Pharaoh. Yet, Moses has a speech impediment—he stutters—and is genuinely helped in his mission by his older brother Aaron who does the public speaking for him. (Exodus 7). Despite Moses's misgivings as to his own abilities, he is able to accept help and ultimately agrees to God's call and leads the Children of Israel out of slavery.

However, he later feels overwhelmed by his task and unable to go on, crying to God in his despair: (Numbers 11: 12), The demands are too great, and Moses feels inadequate to the task. He doubts that he can provide for all the people (Numbers 11: 13, 21–23) and blames himself (Numbers 11: 14), challenging God to kill him (Numbers 11: 15). God listens and responds by providing Moses with the help of seventy people, a Sanhedrin, (Numbers 11: 16–17).

A contrast of these two narratives is presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Moses against Oedipus.

Stage	Oedipus	Moses
1. Precipitating Stressor	Oedipus's mother gives a servant the infant boy to be exposed on mountain top and die.	Moses's mother sends the infant Moses away to save him from being killed by Pharaoh.
2. Reaction	Oedipus is rescued and raised by the king of a neighboring state, Corinth	Moses is rescued and raised by the daughter of Pharaoh
3. Response of Others	Oedipus's identity is questioned, and he has no one he can trust He attempts unsuccessfully to gain usable information from the Oracle of Delphi, who speaks in riddles and entraps Oedipus into patricide and incest.	Moses sees an Egyptian mistreating an Israelite and kills him with a rock. He flees Egypt, but God appears to Moses and chooses him to lead the Israelites against Egypt and give him necessary help first (Aaron, and subsequently a Sanhedrin).
4. Effect	Oedipus attempts to save Thebes from a plague but is undone by maddening riddles from others, resulting in Oedipus's self-blinding as well as many killings and suicides.	Moses is able to carry out his mission in leading the Israelites to freedom.

4.6. Feeling Abandoned by One's Child Leaving the Family Nest and Building His/Her Own Life: Treating the Phaedra Syndrome with the Rebecca Intervention

Here, we compare the Greek suicide story of Phaedra with the biblical suicide-prevention story of Rebecca regarding addressing the suicidal implications of feeling one's child is going on to live his/her own life.

The Phaedra Syndrome. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, the goddess Aphrodite plots to destroy Hippolytus, the son of King Theseus for living in chastity (ll. 108–112) and for his overbearing hatred of women (ll.616–67) by filling his stepmother, Phaedra, with passion for him, and turns the heart of his father against him. Aphrodite accomplishes this by

causing Phaedra to fall madly in love with him. Phaedra attempts to resist her passion, but she is betrayed by her servant who reveals her secret to Hippolytus (ll.599–615). Exposed, Phaedra hangs herself (ll. 776–779), leaving behind a note that falsely accuses Hippolytus of having raped her (ll. 882–898). Despite Hippolytus’s denial and insistence on his innocence, Theseus believes the contents of the note and pronounces a curse of death on his son. The curse is soon fulfilled, and the truth of Hippolytus’s innocence is revealed too late. According to this play, the gods are selfish and cruel, utterly without compassion toward human beings. Aphrodite destroys Hippolytus for living in chastity and for his hatred of women (ll.665–67) by filling his stepmother, Phaedra, with passion for him, and turns the heart of his father against him.

There is no stopper in Phaedra’s rush toward suicide. Death seems to be the only cure: (l. 397). As she expresses it with finality, “I know only one way, one cure for these my woes, and that is instant death” (l. 599). Additionally, she hangs herself (ll. 773–776) as is discovered by her nurse (LL. 776–77).

The Rebecca Intervention. The story of the biblical matriarch Rebecca is dramatically different. instructs Isaac to go away to her brother Laban, so that Jacob will not be killed by his brother Esau who feels that Jacob has stolen his father’s blessing that rightly belongs to him as the elder (Gen. 27:42–45). Immediately afterward, Rebecca said to Isaac, “I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth. If Jacob takes a wife of the daughters of Heth, like these who are the daughters of the land, what good shall my life be to me?” (Gen. 27:46)

Although this can be read as a “suicidal ideation” narrative, such an interpretation may be somewhat overdrawn. Rebecca’s words seem more like a message to her husband: “Please fix this situation because I can’t stand it even though I was complicit in bringing it about,” He listens, and Isaac commands Jacob to not marry one of the daughters of Canaan, who are so offensive to Rebecca and instead tells him to go to Laban and marry one of his daughters. Rebecca is relieved, and there is no more mention of her “suicidal” musings (Gen. 28:1–4). Rebecca is not seductive towards her son, nor does she try to block him from living his own life. What she wants is that Jacob marry a suitable partner. When Isaac listens to her, Rebecca’s suicidal impulse is resolved.

A contrast of these two narratives is presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Rebecca against Phaedra.

Stage	Phaedra	Rebecca
1. Precipitating Stressor	Phaedra falls passionately in love with her stepson Hippolytus, wanting him for herself.	Rebecca is concerned that her son Jacob will marry a totally unsuitable Hittite woman
2. Reaction	Phaedra attempts to resist her passion but becomes suicidally depressed.	Rebecca tells her husband Isaac that “her life will not be worth living” if Jacob marries a Hittite woman, like his brother Esau did.
3. Response of Others	Phaedra’s servant betrays the secret of her infatuation to Hippolytus.	Isaac sends Jacob away to marry a daughter of Rebecca’s brother Laban.
4. Effect	Phaedra hangs herself and leaves a note to her husband Theseus falsely accusing Hippolytus of raping her, leading to his death.	Rebecca is satisfied and does not speak of suicide again.

4.7. Feeling Doomed by a Dysfunctional (Indeed Incestuous) Family of Origin: Treating the Antigone Syndrome with the Ruth Intervention

Let us compare the Greek suicide story of Antigone with the biblical life-affirming story of Ruth with regard to addressing the suicidal implications of coming from a dysfunctional (indeed incestuous) family of origin.

The Antigone Syndrome. Greek thought posits that one is doomed when being born of a dysfunctional family. Oedipus expresses this succinctly “For now. I am forsaken of the

gods, son of a defiled mother, and successor to his bed who gave me my own wretched being.” (Sophocles 1938c, Oedipus the King, ll. 1359–1361). This is played out in the story of Antigone, daughter (and half-sister) of Oedipus. She is the product of the incestuous union of Oedipus and his mother Jocasta.

Antigone is unable to separate herself from the incestuous nature of her birth. “From what manner of parents did I take my miserable being? And to them I go thus, accursed, unwed, to share their home” (Sophocles 1938b, *Antigone*, l. 869). Antigone (which in ancient Greek literally translates to “opposed to motherhood or anti-generative”) ultimately hangs herself after being buried alive for trying to bury her dead brother Polyneices, a rebel against Thebes, against the order of her uncle Creon, the ruler of Thebes. Strikingly, Antigone says she values her brother more than a husband or a child because the latter can be replaced while the former cannot (Sophocles 1938b, *Antigone*, 907–913).

The Ruth Intervention. The biblical narrative of Ruth offers a hopeful alternative. One can overcome the effects of a dysfunctional or even an abandoning family. “Cast me not off, neither forsake me, O god of my salvation. For though my father and mother have forsaken me, the Lord will take me up.” (Psalm 27: 9–10). When the sinful people of Sodom are destroyed, Lot and his two daughters escape thinking their father is the last living man, they get him drunk and have sexual relations with him, so that humanity will not perish. (Genesis 19: 31). Out of the union of Lot and his older daughter come the people from Moab (literally, “from the father” in Biblical Hebrew). Thus, Ruth also is a product of incest, several generations removed. Nevertheless, Ruth the Moabitess does not remain a victim but progresses to becoming a survivor and an important figure in the history of Israel. This despite the fact that Ruth, her mother-in-law Naomi, and her sister-in-law Orpah all are widowed while “strangers in a strange land,” without male relatives to protect them and thus vulnerable. Indeed, Orpah abandons Naomi and returns home. However, Ruth does not and in one of the most moving speeches in the Hebrew Bible she pledges her loyalty to her mother-in-law: “Whither thou goest, I will go....” (Ruth 1: 16–17).

Naomi accepts Ruth as her daughter and brings Ruth back with her to Judah and facilitates Ruth’s marriage to her kinsman Boaz. Yet, despite her losses and despite her dysfunctional family history several generations earlier, Ruth, unlike Antigone, is not suicidal, thrives and becomes a mother of Obed, and ancestress of King David and the Davidic line, Integrating Naomi into her family in a beautiful way (Ruth 4).

A contrast of these two narratives is presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Ruth against Antigone.

Stage	Antigone	Ruth
1. Precipitating Stressor	Antigone is a direct product of an unintentional incestuous relationship between Oedipus and his mother Jocasta.	Ruth is a descendant of an intentional incestuous relationship on the part of Lot’s eldest daughter with her father, albeit conducted for a positive reason.
2 Reaction	Though raised in a seemingly secure home, Antigone does not seem to be able to separate from her family of origin	Though Ruth is widowed at an early age and away from her native land, she does not seem to be enmeshed and indeed is able to bond to her also widowed mother-in-law Naomi
3. Response of Others	Antigone over-identifies with her family of origin and winds up being buried alive because she will not leave her brother fighting against Thebes to remain unburied.	Naomi accepts Ruth as her daughter and brings Ruth back with her to Judah and facilitates Ruth’s marriage to Boaz, the kinsman of Naomi.
4. Effect	Antigone hangs herself, rejecting her would be lover. Antigone means in Greek against generativity (semen).	Ruth thrives and becomes a mother of Obed, and ancestress of King David and the Davidic line. Integrates Naomi into her family in a beautiful way.

Moreover, beyond the scope of this paper, we retrospectively classified fourteen actual suicidal patients (seven men and seven women) as real-life illustrations of these seven risk

factors (one man and one woman for each factor) and our treatment histories are discussed. Sometimes, we were successful, but at times we failed.²¹

5. Conclusions

There is no question that suicides have been stigmatized over the ages. Some of this stigmatization has come out of a desire to preserve life, and another part has come out of a need to control people. For anyone who has ever worked on a suicide hotline, it becomes painfully apparent that suicide is almost always an ambivalent act. People (more often women) may swallow an overdose of pills, and then call a hotline for someone to help them (see [Stengel 1964](#)) Men have tended to use more lethal methods, such as shooting themselves. This is why the most recent statistics of the American Association of Suicidology reveal that in America, women are roughly three times more likely to attempt suicide, though men are 3.6 times more likely to die by suicide. Compared to men, women show higher rates of suicidal thinking, non-fatal suicidal behavior, as well as suicide attempts. Trying to understand why this occurs provides a portal into the meaning of suicide for a person. Crucial to this question is an examination of any suicide notes that are left behind. They are sometimes quite hostile and designed to hurt people whom the suicide thinks have wronged him/her.

The standard death certificate in America employs the NASH categorization system regarding cause of death (N = natural, A = accidental, S = suicide, and H = homicide).. However, the stigmatization of suicide may lead some medical examiners to classify a suicide as a natural or accidental death. My experience as consultant on The [Detroit Free Press \(1997\)](#) Study of the Kevorkian cases with regard to physician-assisted suicide provided evidence of this. The same method of death occurring on Dr. Kevorkian's apparatuses²² did not always seem to be classified in exactly the same manner in different counties in Michigan by different medical examiners

Granted these cases were unique but the variation in classification of very similar physician-assisted deaths may have been influenced by some unarticulated criteria with regard to the stigmatization of suicide and reluctance to label a death as such. This tendency may have been accentuated by the claim that these deaths were physician -assisted suicides, a category that had no previous legal precedent. This of course, was not helpful to our understanding of the process, and impeded what should be our overreaching goal, to do no harm and preserve life (see [Kaplan 2000](#)). Strikingly, in these cases, approximately two-thirds of the completed suicides were women, exactly opposite the national findings on gender differences in completed suicides discussed above. (also see [Canetto and Hollenshead 2000](#); [Kaplan et al. 2000, 2002](#)). [Canetto and Hollenshead \(2000\)](#) hypothesize that women "die for love" while men "die for honor".

This observation fits the pattern we described earlier in this paper regarding gender differences described in Greek tragic suicides among characters in the plays of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. It does not seem to fit the pattern of biblical suicides and suicide preventions discussed previously. The significance of this is that contrary to some current thinking, biblical women may have had more of a secure sense of self that those in Greek society. An example of this can be seen in the respective Greek and Hebrew words for

²¹ The reader is referred again to [Kaplan and Cantz \(2017\)](#). *Biblical Psychotherapy: Reclaiming Scriptural Narratives for Positive Psychology and Suicide Prevention*, Chapters 5 through 11. pp. 101–76. Also see ([Shoham 2011](#); [Hazon 2012](#)).

²² The first two of Kevorkian's deaths employed a device called a "Thanatron" or death machine, fittingly named after the Greek *daemon*, *Thanatos*. It worked by pushing a button to deliver the euthanizing drugs mechanically through an IV. It consisted of three bottles mounted on a metal frame. Each had a syringe that connected to a single IV line in the person's arm. The first contained *saline* to ensure the line was open. The second contained a sleep—inducing barbiturate, *sodium thiopental*, and the third, a lethal mixture of *potassium chloride*, which immediately stopped the person's heart. The person's arm dropped after receiving the barbiturate, thus releasing the lethal potassium chloride. This provided the narrative that the patient had committed suicide rather than being killed by Kevorkian. Kevorkian's medical license was revoked after the first two deaths, forcing Kevorkian to employ an apparatus employing a gas mask fed by a canister of carbon monoxide which was called ironically a "Mercitron" (mercy machine). Legalizing physician-suicide (PAS) opens a door that will not be so easy to close. I strongly advocate keeping it illegal, and looking the other way upon rare occasion! Rational suicide is often more rationalized than rational with potentially lethal effects. This is why this paper is such a strong advocate of a biblical psychotherapy with which we will conclude this paper. See the work of [Hendin et al. \(1998\)](#).

the female uterus. The Greek term is *hystera*, implying uncontrolled labile affect, from which psychiatric diagnoses such as *hysteria* derive. It actually was seen as a disease of a “wandering uterus”. The Hebrew term for uterus, in contrast was *rehem*, from which the term *rahamim* derives, denoting compassion or mercy.

Our call for a biblical psychotherapy²³ resonates with the contrasting representations of hope versus hopelessness in Greek and biblical writings. In the Greek account, Zeus sends Pandora, the first woman, to man (Epimetheus) as punishment for his half-brother Prometheus stealing fire and thus gaining some autonomy. One day, Pandora decides to open the box that Zeus had sent along with her. This box contained all the evils in the world, which fly out. Pandora closes the lid as quickly as she could, but too late; only hope remains locked in the box, and unavailable to people. (Hesiod 1991, *Theogony*, ll. 533–615; *Works and Days*, ll. 53–105; Plato 1999c, *Protagoras*; 320c–322a). People are cast adrift searching endlessly for meaning. Hebrew Scriptures portray hope in a very different way. After the great flood ceases, all living creatures, male and female come out from the ark built by Noah and repopulate the earth through their sexual union. God places a rainbow in the heavens as a sign of His covenant with man that He will not send another flood (Genesis 9: 13). The bow becomes the very symbol of hope and provides Noah and his family with a life purpose (see Phipps 1988; Kaplan 2013, 2020).

Nowhere is this contrast more relevant than in the prevention of suicide. Biblical narratives provide a stopper to suicidal crises unavailable in the tragic Greek myths so ingrained in psychological thinking. We had better be careful which humanities and humanism we pine for. In the biblical-rabbinic narratives, you cannot lose for winning, while in classical narratives you can't win for losing. And our lives are on the line! Combating the stigmatization of suicide and those who died from it does not entail promoting it. It is life itself that must be valorized. And this is what the essence of the original biblical message has been. As *Tevye the Milkman* sings in *Fiddler on the Roof*,

“La Chaim, La Chaim, to Life!!!”

“To Life, to Life, La Chaim!!!”

Funding: This research received funding from the 2006–2007 International Fulbright program at Tel Aviv University as well as an award (Grant # 12457) from the John Templeton Foundation at the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Medicine to study and write about this question. I more recently received an award in 2016–2017 from the Portes Foundation Grant: *Identifying Longitudinal Psychiatric Risk Factors for Suicide and Suicide Prevention*.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declared no conflict of interest.

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²³ The author is indebted to the pioneering work of Erich Wellisch (1954), Philip Slater (1968) and Yosef Yerushalmi (1991).

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