

THE AFTERLIFE - A POSTMORTEM JOURNEY



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So many accept that the normative Jewish view on afterlife is that, "Jews believe in life and living, the here and now. We don't focus on the afterlife."

While this perspective may accurately describe twentieth century Judaism, it is NOT representative of the broad-range historical legacy of Judaism. Nor is it reflective of the perspective of Jewish renewal, which integrates mystical Judaism into contemporary Jewish practice.

In the pre-modern Jewish world - the world of Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Hasidic and Kabbalistic masters, and even the Rabbis of the Mishna and Talmud - never is there any doubt about the survival of the soul and of consciousness after death. Between the world of the living and the world of a dead is a window, not a wall.

Jewish renewal recognizes that the soul passes through a journey of completion and purification after the death of the physical body. According to the sources, this is a four-fold journey.

While these time frames are not exact, it is understood that immediately after death there is a seven--day period of transition - *Hibbut HaKever*, "the pangs of the grave" - as the soul leaves go of its attachment to the physical body. According to Zohar (I, 218b-219a) "for seven days the soul [*nephesh*] goes to and fro from his house to his grave from his grave to his house, mourning for the body..." Interestingly, this corresponds with the Shiva period, suggesting a time of transition for both the soul and the bereaved.

Next, Rabbinic and Kabbalistic sources speak of a process, a stage called *Gehenna*, purgation. In traditional sources this is described as a (maximum) twelve-month period of torment and purgation. "In *Gehenna* there are certain places [where] souls that have been polluted by the filth of this world... are purified by fire and made white, and then they ascend towards the heavenly regions" (Zohar, II, 150b). In Jewish renewal, consonant with the mystics of old, *Gehenna* is not a geographical place as much as a state of being. It is a state of consciousness in which the soul of the deceased wrestles with unresolved guilt, grief and other incomplete emotions of the life just lived. The process of Kaddish, corresponding with this stage, is likewise a process of completion, clearing up the unresolved for both the bereaved and the soul of the deceased.

The third stage of the post-mortem journey is referred to as *Gan Eden*. It is said that after purgation of *Gehenna*, the soul takes repose in the heavenly Garden of Eden. This is a

time of spiritual reflection, where souls commune with like-minded souls. For the Rabbis, *Gan Eden* was a paradise of perpetual study of Torah. In contemporary terms, it is a harvesting of the accrued spirituality of one's lifetime.

There are seven realms of *Gan Eden*, experienced according to the level of spiritual development achieved by an individual. According to traditional belief, the act of the bereaved saying Kaddish at the time of Yahrzeit helps the soul ascend higher in *Gan Eden*.

Finally, traditional sources suggest that a soul returns to a realm called *Tzror Ha-Hayyim*, "source of life", "bond of life" - a realm of unification with the godhead, said to be under the Throne of God.

Jewish renewal also accepts the notion of reincarnation of souls. Hence, it might be said that the soul returns to *Tzror Ha-Hayyim*, the Source of Life, in order to receive its calling for another incarnation (*gilgul*).

The reintegration of these traditional ideas of a post mortem journey and reincarnation into contemporary Jewish practice can transform Jewish notions of living and dying.

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