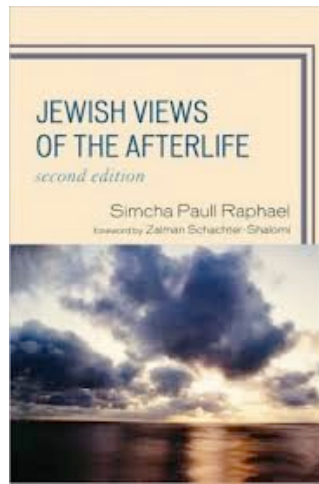


***THE AFTERLIFE -
A BRIEF SKETCH ACCORDING TO ZOHAR***



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The medieval period produced a rich proliferation of Jewish mystical writings delineating the ultimate postmortem destiny of the soul. Kabbalistic soul doctrine, particularly in the Zohar, expanded notions of afterlife originally articulated in the Torah, and later in the Talmud and Midrash. Since eschatological beliefs were neither systematized nor codified, kabbalistic afterlife teachings form a panoramic pastiche of images, a descriptive cartography of ever-changing visionary phenomena and states of consciousness encountered at the moment of bodily death and in the world beyond.

In the Zohar, the postmortem journey is conceived as a four-fold process of: separation from the physical realm; emotional cleansing; transcendent awareness; and, ultimately, divine union. Terms used to describe these processes are: *hibbut ha-kever* (pangs of the grave as one departs the physical realm); *gehenna* (a state of emotional purification and purgation); *gan eden* (the heavenly Garden of Eden, a realm of transcendent divine recompense); and *tzror ha-hayyim* (a return to the Source of Life, wherein the highest level of soul qualities merge with the divine).

1. HIBBUT HA-KEVER – THE “PANGS OF THE GRAVE.”

Hibbut ha-kever is depicted as a three- to seven-day process of separation of the soul from the physical body. During this time, the disembodied being undergoes a purification process, surrendering attachments to the physical realm. For those beings clinging to physical existence, the process of separation can be excruciatingly painful. The disembodied soul “wanders about the world and beholds the body which was once its home devoured by worms and suffering the judgment of the grave [*hibbut ha-kever*]” (Zohar II, 141b-142a). However, those beings which have cultivated spiritual awareness leave behind body and

material existence less painfully, even effortlessly, “like drawing a hair out of milk” (BT Ber. 8a).

There is a correlation between the length of time of *hibbut ha-kever* and the seven-day traditional mourning period (shiva), as the Zohar indicates: “for seven days the soul goes to and fro from his house to his grave from his grave to his house, mourning for the body” (Zohar I, 218b).

In early phases of the afterlife journey, the disembodied soul experiences a variety of visionary experiences. The Zohar describes how ancestral beings and angelic guides escort the soul from the time of death onwards:

At the hour of a man’s departure from the world, his father and his relatives gather round him, and he sees them and recognizes them, and likewise all with whom he associated in this world, and they accompany his soul to the place where it is to abide. (Zohar I, 218a)

Elsewhere, the Zohar asserts that: “no man leaves the world before he sees the *Shekhinah*” (Zohar 3:88a) and “with the *Shekhinah* there come three ministering angels to receive the soul of the righteous” (Zohar I, 98a). Another vision depicted is a life review: “when God desires to take back a man’s spirit, all the days that he lived in this world pass before him in review” (Zohar I, 221b). These various postmortem visions all parallel reports from contemporary near-death experiences.

2. GEHENNA – EMOTIONAL PURGATION AND PURIFICATION.

The second phase of the afterlife journey is a state of purgation known as *gehenna*, or *gehinnom*. As developed within the moral, ethical worldview of the rabbis, *gehenna* was an abode of torment for the wicked who have forsaken God and Torah. Medieval Kabbalah adopted this viewpoint, but understood *gehenna* psycho-spiritually as a process of cleansing and transforming incomplete, unresolved emotional residue of life experience. According to the Zohar: “whoever pollutes himself in the world draws to himself the spirit of uncleanness,

and when his soul leaves him the unclean spirits pollute it, and its habitation is among them” (Zohar I, 129b).

This cleansing process of *gehenna* is described as purification by fire: “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” (Zohar II, 150b). Fire is utilized to punish souls because it represents the quality of human passion: “the fire of *gehenna*, which burns day and night, corresponds to the hot passion of sinfulness in man” (Zohar II, 150b). The greater one’s unbridled passion (usually implying sexuality), the more intensely the fire burns. Thus, the soul’s *gehenna* experience reflects the impurities accumulated during one’s lifetime. The more defiled, the greater the need for fires of purification:

When a man’s sins are so numerous that he has to pass through the nethermost compartments of *gehenna* in order to receive heavier punishment corresponding to the contamination of his soul, a more intense fire is kindled in order to consume that contamination. (Zohar II, 212a)

Adopting rabbinic tradition (BT Shab. 33b), kabbalists affirmed that purification in *gehenna* was to be endured for a maximum of 12 months, after which time the soul transits to higher afterlife realms (Zohar I, 107a-108a). The ritual practice of children reciting Mourners’ Kaddish for a deceased parent emerged in medieval times as a spiritually efficacious practice for redeeming the soul from the torments of *gehenna*. Rabbi Moses Isserles (1525-1572) limited recitation of Mourners’ Kaddish for parents to eleven months. According to Isserles, since twelve months was the maximum time for a soul in *gehenna*, one would not want to assume one’s dead parents merited full punishment.

When the purification of *gehenna* ends, the soul is ready to enter subsequent phases of afterlife sojourning. As the Zohar teaches:

The body is punished in the grave and the soul in the fire of *gehinnom* for the appointed period. When this is completed it rises from *gehinnom* purified of its guilt like iron purified in the fire, and is carried up to Gan Eden. (Zohar III, 53a)

3. GAN EDEN – THE HEAVENLY GARDEN OF EDEN.

The third phase of the afterlife journey is described as Gan Eden, the heavenly Garden of Eden where the souls of the righteous dwell. Depicted in mythic images of beauty and bliss in late midrashic tradition (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Bereshit 20), in medieval Kabbalah Gan Eden is essentially a period of intellectual contemplation of supernal bliss, experienced by the transcendent dimensions of soul. Eternal in nature, the cleansed soul in the heavenly Gan Eden experiences a state of consciousness reflecting the level of spiritual development attained during life:

... when the soul mounts on high through that portal of the firmament [i.e., to the heavenly Gan Eden], other precious garments are provided for it of a more exalted order, made out of the zeal and devotion which characterized the deceased's Torah study and prayer. (Zohar II, 210b)

The robes or celestial garments worn by the righteous in Gan Eden reflect the quality of an individual's spiritual attainment (cf. Zohar II, 229b).

The soul continues its postmortem ascent and eventually enters Upper Gan Eden, “a compartment reserved for the pious of a higher grade” (Zohar II, 130a). Here the soul immerses in the celestial River of Light (*nehar dinur*), continuing the healing process and purging remaining defilements (Zohar II, 211b). In these supernal realms of Upper Gan Eden there are continual gradations, increasingly elevated abodes where the finely purified and righteous dwell, each soul in accordance with the accumulated merit of its life. The more spiritually developed a soul is, the higher the realm in which it abides: “as the works of the righteous differ in this world, so do their place and lights differ in the next world” (Zohar I, 129a).

The Gan Eden phase of afterlife experience corresponds with the ritual act of observing a Yahrzeit, the anniversary of a death. According to kabbalistic teachings, the act of recitation of Kaddish at the time of a Yahrzeit elevates the soul every year to a higher sphere in Gan Eden. In remembering the deceased, the living have the ability to assist a disembodied soul's ascent through Gan Eden.

4. TZROR HA-HAYYIM – RETURN TO THE SOURCE.

According to kabbalistic tradition, the soul's repose in Gan Eden is not eternal. After completing a stay in Gan Eden, souls enter *tzror ha-hayyim*: "the bond of life," "source of life," or literally, "the bundle of the living" (I Sam 25:29). *Tzror ha-hayyim* is said to be a cosmic storehouse of souls, the point of origin and termination for all souls in the universe. This endpoint of the journey is achieved by the most supernal elements of soul capable of direct perception of God:

... the virtuous who are thought to be worthy to be bound up in *tzror ha-hayyim* are privileged to see the glory of the supernal Holy King, and their abode is higher than that of all the holy angels. (Zohar 3 : 182b)

Tzror ha-hayyim is an experience of spiritual union with the divine. However, according to kabbalistic tradition, in certain cases souls require further life adventures and are forced to undergo *gilgul*, reincarnation, or re-embodiment.

REINCARNATION AND RESURRECTION.

Two other motifs inherent to medieval afterlife teachings are reincarnation (*gilgul*) and resurrection of the dead (*tehiyat ha-metim*). Medieval Kabbalah infused an entirely new afterlife concept into Jewish tradition - the doctrine of *gilgul* (transmigration or reincarnation). The kabbalists taught that after migrating through the postmortem realms, many souls are eventually reborn, and through physical re-embodiment enable further restitution for the wrong-doings of a previous life.

The doctrine of *gilgul* first appeared in *Sefer ha- Bahir* (c. 1150-1200), as an esoteric doctrine explicated indirectly through metaphor and parable. Over the next century, this esoteric doctrine became widespread and, from the Zohar onwards, belief in reincarnation became normative in kabbalistic circles. Within the Zohar there are explicit discourses on reincarnation, teaching that: "... all souls must undergo transmigration; but men do not perceive the ways of the Holy One... they do not perceive the many transmigrations... which the Holy One accomplishes." (Zohar III, 99b)

For the early kabbalists, *gilgul* offered those guilty of sexual transgressions opportunity to experience further restitution. Through rebirth, one was given the gift of another lifetime to make amends for sins committed.

In harmonizing teachings on *gilgul* with rabbinic theology, the Zohar asserted that the extent of one's obedience to the *mitzvot* determined whether or not one had to undergo *gilgul*. Ultimately the aim of *gilgul* was to further purify the soul and provide further opportunity for self improvement, and the fulfilling of *mitzvot*.

Committed to rabbinic tradition, the kabbalists embraced the doctrine of *tehiyat ha-metim*, physical resurrection of the dead at the end-of-days. However, for the kabbalists, the resurrected physical body would be totally spiritualized and transformed. Following judgment at the end-of-days, the radiant perfected soul would re-enter a fully resurrected body.

Over time, kabbalistic communities, particularly in Safed, downplayed bodily resurrection. Belief in physical resurrection could not be harmonized with the spiritual, metaphysical cosmology of Lurianic Kabbalah. Resurrection was interpreted in a spiritual sense as a materialization of the spiritual body. Souls which had not fully evolved a spiritual

body, it was taught, would, at the time of collective resurrection, materialize on earth in order to fulfill any remaining *mitzvot*.

Ultimately for the kabbalists, resurrection itself is not the ultimate state of being. The fully-awakened soul within a spiritualized, resurrected body was seen as divinity itself fully realized. The ultimate goal was union with the Divine Being, the absorption of the soul in the Godhead itself.

The rich heritage of medieval afterlife teachings were incorporated into Hasidism, and infused into Eastern European folk culture. However, with modernity and the advent of the Enlightenment, medieval mystical teachings on the afterlife were rejected or ignored. Today there is a thriving curiosity in Jewish views of the afterlife, and once again the legacy of medieval afterlife teachings is being explored.

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