

# ***DO JEWS BELIEVE IN THE AFTERLIFE?***

CHAPTER 2 OF *JEWISH VIEWS OF THE AFTERLIFE*  
"IS THERE AFTERLIFE AFTER AUSCHWITZ?"

*by*

*Simcha Paull Raphael, Ph.D*



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### **Reb Simcha Raphael, Ph.D.**

Founding Director of the DA'AT Institute, Reb Simcha received his doctorate in Psychology from the California Institute of Integral Studies and was ordained as a Rabbinic Pastor by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. A psychotherapist, spiritual director, and Adjunct Faculty at Bryn Athyn College in Philadelphia, he is a Fellow of the Rabbis Without Borders Network, lectures widely and leads scholar-in-residence programs on Jewish death awareness education.



1211 Ansley Avenue, Melrose Park, PA 19027  
[drsimcha@daatinstitute.net](mailto:drsimcha@daatinstitute.net)

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## CHAPTER 2 OF JEWISH VIEWS OF THE AFTERLIFE “ IS THERE AFTERLIFE AFTER AUSCHWITZ?”<sup>1</sup>

### DO JEWS BELIEVE IN THE AFTERLIFE?

There is a story told about an eighty-five year old Jewish woman who was in a convalescent hospital dying. Her concerned daughter wanted to do all she could to help the elderly woman in her final days and weeks. She made plans to visit the hospital to read her mother selections from the Tibetan Book of the Dead - a religious text with elaborate descriptions of what one encounters subsequent to physical death.

Just stop for a moment and contemplate that scene. An elderly Jewish woman, likely raised on gefilte fish and chicken soup, is close to the end of her life. Her baby-boomer daughter, a product of Dr. Spock and the Beatles, is willingly ready to read her mother contents of a sixteenth century Buddhist deathbed manual. That scene is suggestive of a cultural smorgasbord possible only in the age of the global village.

A psychologist working with dying patients cautioned the young woman against reading her mother the contents of this death manual created by Tibetan Buddhist monks. He explained that the arcane symbolism and deathbed meditations of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* would frighten and confuse the elderly woman, rather than help her understand the process and experience of dying. Instead, the daughter was advised to go and read her dying mother old Yiddish love songs.<sup>2</sup>

Given the circumstances, it is appears that Yiddish love songs were the appropriate substitute. The scene of an elderly, dying Jewish woman being read Yiddish love poetry suggests a much greater quality of cultural harmony than the intrusion of Tibetan Buddhist deathbed meditations. Yet, an important question emerges from this anecdote: why are Yiddish love songs the recommended resource for assisting a Jewish person at the time of death?

Throughout the world, there are religious texts on dying and death, specifically designed to provide assistance at the time of passage from this world. The Buddhists have the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*; there is an *Egyptian Book of the Dead*; Hindus, Moslems and most native North American Indian cultures have traditions about survival in the afterlife; even medieval Christianity produced a genre of literature entitled, *Ars Moriendi*, "the Art of Dying" which discusses the post-mortem fate of the soul. Is there a Jewish tradition on the afterlife journey of the soul, or specific Jewish texts which can be of help to people at the time of death? What exactly are the Jewish resources for guiding a person through the transition from life to death?

When dealing with dying, grief, loss and the inevitability of human mortality, people frequently ask the question: "Is there a life after death?" and, as to be expected, Jews more specifically inquire: "Does Judaism believe in an afterlife?" However, the second half of this question frequently creates a quandary for Jews and non-Jews alike. The reality is that the whole topic of life after death in Judaism is perplexing and problematic.

When asked "What do Jews believe about life after death?" individuals respond with a variety of answers which invariably demonstrate both confusion and a paucity of information available on the hereafter in Jewish tradition. "Jews believe in life after death, but there are no details to speak of," is a common answer. Or: "Jews believe that the soul is eternal, and after death one lives on as a soul". Another recurring theme frequently expressed is: "Jews believe that there is a resurrection of the dead that will take place after the Messiah comes." "My grandmother told me to burn my finger nails so I won't have to go looking for them at the time of the resurrection," said one individual. With some variation many often claim: "Jews believe in a World to Come, Olam Haba, and eventually one enters this world." In a similar vein, others say: "When I was young and my father died, I was told he was with God in Heaven. We believe in Heaven." However, when pressed for additional details, or enhanced philosophical exploration of this topic, even among those who are well-versed in Jewish thought, there is not a great deal more information



forthcoming. Simply put, most modern Jews are vastly unaware of Jewish teachings on the afterlife. Why?

Well, there is one additional answer that always emerges when asking people about Jewish beliefs in the afterlife. And this answer, expressed in the following anecdote, is really central to this whole problem about the afterlife in Judaism.

Recently, a rabbi was lecturing a group of nurses on "Bio-Medical Ethics: The Jewish Approach". When asked by a member of the audience, "Does Judaism believe in an afterlife?", forthrightly the rabbi replied: "Judaism celebrates life and the living. It dwells on life here rather than on the hereafter as other religious faiths do. Life is precious, the here and the now."<sup>3</sup>

This response, which is absolutely characteristic of modern Judaism's attitude towards the afterlife, is the singularly most problematic Jewish belief about life after death today. Why? Because its simply not true!

Yes, Judaism does value life, here and now, over and above a future death and eternal life.<sup>4</sup> As Abraham Joshua Heschel, so eloquently expressed: "the cry for a life beyond the grave is presumptuous if it is not accompanied by a cry for eternal life prior to death".<sup>5</sup> Yes, it is accurate to maintain that Judaism has a life-affirming, this-worldly orientation which proclaims the sanctity and significance of physical plane life. This world, divinely-given for humanity to enjoy, appreciate and sanctify, has always been very important for Judaism, because within the context of physical, embodied life one can fulfill the divine commandments, or *mitzvot*. There is no doubt that Judaism is committed to *tikkun olam* - the "mending of the world" - the total transformation of the socio-political realm of human existence. But this does not imply there is no Jewish belief in an afterlife! To deny or politely by-pass Jewish notions of life after death is a pedagogical error promulgated by all too many instructors of Judaism.

Somehow, in the twentieth century, Judaism has been proclaimed as a "here and now religion". As an inadvertent result, both Jews and non-Jews, have come to believe that Judaism does not have any conception of a life after death. Therefore it

is not surprising that when seeking accessible resources for responding to the crisis of death, many turn to other traditions such as the Tibetan Book of the Dead, or read Yiddish love poetry for spiritual solace.

However, it is the intention of this book to demonstrate that Judaism does have a belief in life after death. Even more to the point - as Chapters 3-9 convincingly establish - there exists a profound and extensive legacy of Jewish teachings on the afterlife. Over the course of four millennia, Judaism evolved and promulgated a multi-faceted philosophy of post-mortem survival, with doctrines comparable to those found in the great religions of the world. In short - ***Jews have always believed in life after death.***

### **THE PRE-MODERN JEWISH LEGACY ON THE AFTERLIFE**

To illustrate how pervasive afterlife teachings have been in pre-modern Judaism, and as a foretaste of the content of this book, consider the following vignettes of Jewish literary history:

In 1626, in Mantua, Italy, Rabbi Aaron Berachia ben Moses of Modena authored a text entitled *Maavor Yabok*, literally "Crossing the River Yabok". (In Genesis 32 Jacob crossed over the River Yabok and this is the metaphor used in the title of this text). *Maavor Yabok* is a compilation of writings on death, dying and the philosophy of the afterlife. Based upon the Kabbalistic philosophy of the soul expounded by Isaac Luria, this text is replete with descriptions of the soul's experiences at the time of death, and beyond.<sup>6</sup> More than any other Hebrew book, *Maavor Yabok* may be considered as a "Jewish Book of the Dead".

Produced specifically for the *Hevra Kaddisha*, or Burial Society, of Mantua, this text was rapidly accepted in both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewish communities of the time. Over the course two centuries, *Maavor Yabok* was printed in over twenty editions, and became the standard *Hevra Kaddisha* manual for Jews in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>7</sup> Although untranslated, this text is still in print to this day!

Another text worthy of note is *Nishmat Hayyim*, "The Soul of Life" by Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel<sup>8</sup> Menasseh ben Israel was a scholar, commercial entrepreneur and political statesman who negotiated with Oliver Cromwell for permission for Jews to re-enter England. Originally a Marrano who re-embraced Judaism when he migrated from Spain to Amsterdam in the early 1600's, he was the first rabbi and spiritual leader of the Amsterdam Jewish community.<sup>9</sup>

In the author's introduction to *Nishmat Hayyim*, he relates how he was lying awake one night, when a "*Malakh*", angel or spirit guide, appeared to him at his bedside. The visionary being then dictated, or channeled, to Menasseh ben Israel a treatise on "*din gilgul neshamot*", literally "the law of the revolution of souls" - reincarnation. *Nishmat Hayyim* is an eclectic text which presents a survey of Jewish beliefs on topics such as: immortality of the soul; the nature of the astral body; the death-moment itself; post-mortem judgement; the afterlife wanderings of the soul; and other conceptions of the hereafter found in Rabbinic or Kabbalistic sources.

Additionally, while most people have heard of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante's epic poem on heaven, hell and purgatory<sup>10</sup> almost completely unknown is the poetic chronicle of life in the afterlife written by Immanuel Ha-Romi, a thirteenth century Italian Jew. A contemporary of Dante, Ha-Romi authored an elaborate text which portrays his visionary journeying through the post-mortem worlds.<sup>11</sup> Based upon ancient Rabbinic traditions of the afterlife, this text is one of many legendary creations of the medieval period which describe with ornate detail the divine judgement experienced at the time of death, and the Jewish afterlife realms of heaven and hell - known as Gan Eden - the Garden of Eden, and Gehenna - or purgatory. As visionary and imagistic as anything produced by Dante, such texts are not isolated literary products, outside the canon of Jewish tradition. Philosophically-based in Torah and Talmud, they are part and parcel of an extensive and popularized afterlife tradition and as Jewish as Moses and Manishevitz wine!

Thus, as these examples suggest, it is not that Judaism lacks a belief in the afterlife. Rather, the contents of many of these earlier teachings have been lost due,

in part, to the changing nature of modern Jewish society. Over the course of the past century, as Jews left behind the traditional ghetto lifestyle of pre-modern Europe, there has been increasing assimilation and a rapid diminution of commitment to the study and practice of Judaism. And in the twentieth century, as the center of Jewish life shifted from Europe to North America, and from a Hebrew and Yiddish linguistic environment to an English-speaking one, knowledge of and interest in pre-modern Jewish teachings on the afterlife has been lost.

Assuming the young woman mentioned above had been aware of Jewish afterlife teachings, because they were written in a language and cultural metaphor alien to her, she might not have found them very helpful as she attempted to deal with the immediacy of her dying mother's needs.<sup>12</sup> The simple truth of the matter is that modern Jewish life is desperately lacking and passionately seeking adequate spiritual resources for dealing with death and dying.

Standing on the cusp of the twenty-first century, we are living through an era of changing perspectives on dying and death. Now the time is ripe for a re-claiming of ancient Jewish afterlife traditions, and the creation of a contemporary model of the afterlife that makes Jewish post-mortem teachings accessible to individuals dealing with death, dying and bereavement today. Such is the goal of this book.

## **WHAT HAPPENED TO THE AFTERLIFE?**

*Jewish Views of the Afterlife* explores the theme of life after death in Bible, Apocrypha, Mishna, Talmud, Rabbinic and medieval Midrash, medieval philosophy, Kabbalah, and Hasidic tales. In depicting the evolution of afterlife teachings, we shall encounter a plethora of pre-modern teachings on the immortality of the soul; the fate of wandering deceased spirits; post-mortem judgement; individual reward and punishment; mythical visions hell and heaven; reincarnation; resurrection; as well as innumerable Rabbinic and Hasidic folk tales which express a belief in the soul's continued survival after death.

The sheer volume of the material covered in *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* reflects just how extensive is the pre-modern Jewish afterlife tradition. And yet, from this stage in history we are forced to ask: what happened to the afterlife in Judaism? If there is in fact such a legacy of traditional Jewish beliefs on the hereafter, then where has it gone? Why has modern Judaism lost touch with the whole notion of life after death?

The answer to this series of questions is not simple. Both historical and contemporary factors, from within Judaism itself and as a result of cultural transformation in the Western world, have led to the deemphasis of teachings about the fate of the individual after death. Presently, we shall examine some of these factors.

### **1. BIBLICAL JUDAISM'S INHERENT AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS THE AFTERLIFE**

First of all, in the early Biblical period, there is a conscious attempt made to keep a distance from the realm of the deceased. The result is a Biblical text frequently asserting that any interaction between the living and the dead is in violation God's law.

For example, in 1 Samuel 28, King Saul travels to the Witch of En-Dor, and requests of her to evoke the spirit of the deceased Prophet Samuel. After some preliminary conversation, she summons from the netherworld an aged, godlike figure - the Prophet Samuel himself - who delivers a somewhat disheartening message to the King. While this tale points to the existence of a post-mortem realm of the dead, there is something else quite strange going on. In embarking upon his nocturnal visit to the medium from En Dor, Saul had disguised himself in clothing other than his royal, military garb, to avoid being recognized. Why the disguise? Because he himself had "expelled all the mediums and wizards from the land" (1 Sam. 28:3). Thus, there are two contradictory attitudes co-existing simultaneously: on one hand, it is clear that there were those engaged in oracular communication with the dead - even King Saul himself elected to do so. Yet, on the other hand, there had been an official condemnation of necromancy and spiritualistic practices.

Evidence suggests that, at least in the early Biblical period, there was an association between communion with the dead and paganistic, idolatrous practices condemned by the

monotheistic Biblical writers. Thus, in Deuteronomy, condemnation of both mediumship and child sacrifice appear side-by-side:

Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead (Deut. 18:10-11).

Similarly, in Leviticus, there is further evidence establishing a clear distance from the realm of the ancestral dead. Whenever an Israelite High Priest came into contact with a dead body, he was automatically regarded as contaminated, and consequently, seen as unfit for divine service in the tabernacle (Lev. 21:11-12). And why is the priest to avoid contact with dead bodies? The likelihood is that various forms of necromancy were indigenous to religious practice of the Ancient Near East; there were undoubtedly pagan priests in ancient Mesopotamia who practiced various forms of communing with the dead.<sup>13</sup> But the monotheistic Hebrews were commanded to distinguish themselves from such idolatrous practices, and the Biblical writers harshly condemned both physical and spiritistic forms of contact with the world of the dead. In the Biblical worldview, to commune with the dead, even more - to assume that the dead actually survive after death - was at times regarded as a form of idolatry itself.

Because of this ancient view, we find in Biblical Judaism a deep reticence about the dead, and an obvious reluctance to elucidate any overt notion of belief in an afterlife. Even to this day an individual who is a "Kohen" - a descendent of priestly lineage - whether a rabbi or a lay person, is prohibited from coming into contact with a dead body. Based upon a ritual taboo instituted four thousand years ago, in response to Ancient Near Eastern idolatry, today there are many Jews who are completely unable to deal with any physical aspect of death, prohibited to do so by religious law. And even more, this ancient taboo has insidiously affected four thousand years of Jewish thought, and leaves modern Judaism with a tainted, negative attitude towards life after death.

## **2. ESCHATOLOGY: INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE**

To further understand why modern Judaism is often confused about the afterlife, we need to know the difference between individual and collective eschatology. Eschatology is one of those words that scholars throw around like a basketball - it is a theological and



philosophical term derived from the Greek word "eschatos", meaning "that which is furthest." Eschatology is the study of religious and philosophical teachings concerned with that which occurs at "the end of days", i.e. at the time "furthest" from the present. An exceptionally broad subject, eschatology includes topics such as life after death; reincarnation and post-mortem survival of the soul, as well as teachings about the end of time and history; theories of resurrection of body and/or soul; last judgement; messianic redemption of the world; and the ultimate destiny of the entire universe.

Scholars make a distinction between *individual* and *collective* eschatology. Whereas collective eschatology is concerned with the collective future of humanity and the cosmic order at the end of time and history; *individual* eschatology focuses specifically upon the destiny of each unique human being after death. While the two often overlap, when thinking about Jewish afterlife teachings it is useful to understand the difference between these two facets of eschatology: *individual* - the unique person, *collective* the whole nation, the world.

Within Judaism the focus has often been on collective rather than individual eschatology - on the fate of God's chosen nation at the end of time, rather than on the afterlife experiences of the individual. In light of the covenant at Sinai, the Israelite people collectively stood in a direct relationship with God. God's actions impacted upon the nation as a whole; and vice-versa, the behavior of the nation Israel determined God's response. Given this relationship, redemption, according to the Biblical worldview, implies redemption of the entire Israelite nation, not the individual Israelite. The question is not what happens after death, but rather: what will happen to the nation at a future time when God will save and transform the world? The very idea of an individual relationship with God, distinct from the collective Israelite nation does not emerge prior to the sixth century BCE. Even then, collective teachings about ultimate redemption at the end-of-days, messianic renewal, establishment of a divine kingdom on earth, last judgement and eventually, resurrection of the dead, all take precedent over beliefs in an individual hereafter.<sup>14</sup> Thus, collective eschatology, at least in the Biblical period, always supersedes individual afterlife eschatology.

When we investigate Rabbinic Judaism, we find a somewhat confused view of the afterlife. In Rabbinic tradition the term *Olam Haba*, the World to Come, is frequently used

in reference a future post-mortem life. But it is often unclear whether this World to Come is inaugurated immediately after an individual's death, or in the distant future, at the end of time and history when the world will be redeemed.

For example, in one Rabbinic text we find a statement that: "My law will guide you in your path in this world; it will watch over you in your sleep, at the hour of death; and when you wake, it will converse with you in the *Olam Haba*" (*Sifre* on Lev. 18:4).

This passage suggests that *Olam Haba* is a post-mortem world one enters immediately after death. However, elsewhere the Talmud expresses a different point-of-view:

Not like this world will be the World to Come. In this world one has the trouble to harvest grapes and press them; but in the World to Come a person will bring a single grape in a wagon or a ship, store it in the corner of his house, and draw from it enough wine to fill it a large flagon... There will not be a grape which will not yield thirty measures of wine (*Keth.* 111b).

Here the World to Come is not a post-mortem world but rather an era which begins at the end of time and history with the onset of the messianic kingdom. The World to Come seems more like a time of global, super-technology than anything having to do with death and life after death.

Thus, in Rabbinic literature, collective and individual eschatological teachings are frequently fused and confused. No clear distinction is made between philosophical teachings on the ultimate fate of the nation at the end of time, and teachings on the destiny of the individual in the hereafter.

However, just because collective eschatology is often the dominant stream in early Judaism, does not imply that there was never any belief in an individual afterlife. This is a misreading of history and contemporary interpreters of Jewish thought, like Herschel Matt, who claim "the main line of Rabbinic Judaism does not teach the survival of the soul"<sup>15</sup> choose to see only the collective eschatological strands within Judaism. This totally ignores the fact that after the Babylonian Exile, in the sixth century BCE, the conception of an individual post-mortem survival begins to slowly emerge, and that in early and later Rabbinic literature there are teachings on the immortality of the soul. Even more, from the twelve century CE onwards, an increasingly sophisticated series of teachings on the afterlife

journey of the soul are produced in the mystical and mythical literature of medieval Judaism.

### **3. THE INFLUENCE OF MOSES MAIMONIDES**

Another explanation for the modern confusion about life after death can be found in the approach to the afterlife of Moses Maimonides, the most famous Jewish scholar of the medieval period. A committed traditional Jew, Maimonides was a rationalistic philosopher who endeavored to reconcile Jewish tradition with the emerging philosophical worldview of medieval times.

Although he affirms the existence of an immortal soul, when speaking of *Olam Haba*, the World to Come, Maimonides describes it as an other-worldly realm, totally beyond human comprehension. "As to the blissful state of the soul in the World to Come, there is no way on earth in which we can comprehend or know it, " declares Maimonides quite explicitly.<sup>16</sup> With this statement, Maimonides, like other rationalistic Aristotelians of the medieval age, created an unbridgeable chasm between matter and spirit, between human and divine realms. Matter is matter, spirit is spirit, and ne'er the twain shall meet is the dictum of the Maimonidean view. This point-of-view has successfully wedged a gap between the spiritual and human realms, thereby convincing many people that contemplating the question of life after death is a task beyond human ability.

Today, close to eight hundred after Maimonides, his belief that the spiritual life of the World to Come is beyond human comprehension persists within Judaism. In spite of the increasing demise of the rationalistic, Aristotelian worldview, we find these philosophical conceptions echoed in *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, one of the most widely read modern books on death and Judaism. In discussing the afterlife, Maurice Lamm reiterates Maimonides' point of view, saying that, in spite of the Jewish belief in immortality, there are no details available on the afterlife. Why? Because "flesh-and-blood man cannot have any precise conception of the pure, spiritual bliss of the world beyond."<sup>17</sup> This is an uncritical acceptance of Maimonides' philosophical rationalism that ignores the mystical and mythic streams of Judaism wherein are found magnificent textual depictions of the afterlife realms.

And similarly, one generation earlier, the modern German-Jewish theologian Leo Baeck, in his classic of modern Jewish thought, *The Essence of Judaism*, likewise echoed Maimonides' views of the afterlife, stating quite explicitly:

We need but recall the pitying derision with which Maimonides dismissed as antiquated child's play all these fantasies and sensuous conceptions of the world beyond. Basic to Judaism, was the imageless spiritual conception of immortality, which permits not representation, hardly even a verbal one.<sup>18</sup>

As I see it, Maimonides' philosophical dualism actually makes it problematic to understand the nature of Jewish teachings on the afterlife. The Maimonidean point-of-view has caused modern Judaism to price the afterlife out of the market, so to speak. If the spiritual life of the world to come is so lofty, according to Maimonides, human beings cannot even come close to understanding it; at least this is the logic that emanates from a reading of Maimonides. Thus, with the Maimonidean influence as a background, it is no wonder that modern Jews have trouble reflecting on the whole question of a life after death.

But in contemporary culture, Maimonides' Aristotelian dualism, like Newtonian physics, is no longer adequate. To effectively wrestle with many of the philosophical and spiritual questions of our age, we will have to develop a Jewish model that reflects the emerging consciousness of the late twentieth century. Certainly, with regard to the topic of immortality and life after death, there is no doubt that we have to go beyond Maimonides and beyond the rationalistic stream of Judaism, to discover a way of seeing the afterlife journey of the soul in terms that speak to our contemporary point-of-view.

The historical evidence examined thus far has delineated factors within Jewish tradition that have made teachings on the afterlife seem vague and obscure to modern Jews. There are, however, others factors at play which have made it difficult for twentieth century Judaism to rightfully and proudly claim the legacy of Jewish afterlife teachings.

#### **4. RATIONALISM, PSYCHOANALYSIS AND DEATH OF THE AFTERLIFE**

Belief in a life after death can be found in cultures across the globe and throughout the history of civilization. According to Sir James George Frazer, one of the early anthropologists, pre-literate societies always upheld some form of belief in individual post-mortem survival.<sup>19</sup> Archaeological discoveries dating as far back as 50,000 BCE, indicate that in the early stone age people were buried with food, tools, and other implements, "sent

on their journey to the eternal hunting ground, into a realm where a divinity perhaps had its residence."<sup>20</sup> Other archaeological finds from Mesopotamia and Africa reveal a widespread practice of supplying foodstuffs and other provisions to the dead, indicating that ancient humanity believed in ongoing communication between the realm of the dead and the world of human mortals. It was a mutual relationship in which the living provided physical nourishment for the deceased, who, in turn, would bestow blessings and offer assistance with the ongoing demands of physical life.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the archaeological evidence, textual studies reveal widespread beliefs in an eternal realm of the dead in both the ancient and historical religions of the world.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas in the past, belief in a supreme being and a life after death were almost universal, in the modern era, these once-traditional creeds have eroded. Influenced by the philosophical dictates of Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant, the scientific worldview emphasized the value of objective, observable dimensions of human experience, rejecting the relevance of non-observable, internal, subjective or spiritual phenomena. As a consequence of the Enlightenment, Western culture has given increasingly less credence to any and all human experiences that have "non-rational" aspects associated with them. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, with the growth of scientific rationalism, logical positivism and psychoanalysis, god, angels, souls, mystical visions and the idea of individual survival after death were progressively eliminated from the agenda of intellectual inquiry, replaced by an unwavering commitment to rationalism.

In a scientific, rationalistic universe death is seen as the final cessation of life. Since consciousness is regarded as an epiphenomenon of the brain, there can be no awareness separate from the body. When the body dies, a person dies and that is the end. As the philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote, in 1903: "All the evidence goes to show that what we regard as our mental life is bound up with brain structure and organized bodily energy. Therefore it is rational to suppose that mental life ceases when the body ceases."<sup>23</sup> According to the modern scientific worldview, the notion of survival of the soul after death is a non-option. Once the brain waves cease functioning, life is over. No soul. No afterlife. No heaven. Dead is dead. It is this view of life and death which has become the predominant intellectual point-of-view in the twentieth century.

The materialistic point-of-view regarding life after death finds expression, in almost a comical way, in the following passage by Nikita Khrushchev, written soon after the Soviet Union began exploratory space travel:

As to paradise in heaven, we heard about it from the priests. But we wanted to see for ourselves what it was like, so we sent our scout there, Yuri Gagarin. He circled the globe and found nothing in outer space - just complete darkness, he said, and no garden at all, nothing that looked like paradise. We thought the matter over and decided to send another scout. We sent Herman Titov and told him to fly around a bit longer this time and take a good look - Gagarin was only up there for an hour and a half, and he might have missed it. He took off, came back and confirmed Gagarin's conclusion. There's nothing up there, he reported.<sup>24</sup>

One individual who had a monumental impact in promulgating the materialistic, rationalistic attitude towards the afterlife was Sigmund Freud. As a scholar intrigued with the inherent nature of culture, Freud wrote extensively on human beliefs in god, religion, death and immortality.

In his early writings, Freud paid little attention to the theme of death. However, in his forties, Freud recovered from a serious illness, and was also deeply affected by his father's impending death. As the biographies of his life reveal, as Freud became increasingly pre-occupied with fears of dying, he continually wrestled the meaning of death and with questions about post-mortem survival in a world beyond.<sup>25</sup> These personal concerns were reflected in a number of important writings from the latter half of his life - *Totem and Taboo*, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *The Future of An Illusion*, and *Moses and Monotheism*, among others - in which he investigated human religiosity and the origins of beliefs in immortality and divine retribution.

Yet as a product of nineteenth century European thought, Freud's own philosophical worldview precluded any belief in God, a soul or an afterlife. Freud was an atheist Jew who regarded religion as a "universal obsessional neurosis" which reflected a regression to infantile forms of behavior. To relate to a God, according to Freud, was but a childish yearning for a relationship with one's father. Just as a young child yearns for the protection of a father, similarly, in times of vulnerability and helplessness adults respond by yearning for a supra-human figure, a God who can guarantee security and protection against the hostile forces of life. For Freud, the very idea of God is a human creation, but a distorted



expression of humanity's wish for security. But as civilization matures, i.e. becomes increasingly rational, human beings will recognize the fallacy of all religious beliefs. And ultimately, suggests Freud, religion will be rightfully superseded by rationalism, empirical science and by psychoanalysis itself.<sup>26</sup>

In Totem and Taboo, Freud examines early humanity's response to death, and offers his reflections on the evolution of ideas of the hereafter. The so-called primitive, he explains, could neither understand nor conceive of the idea of physical death. In response to human mortality, the primitive "invented" the idea of spirits and post-mortem survival:

Man could no longer keep death at a distance, for he had tasted it in his pain about the dead; but he was nevertheless unwilling to acknowledge it, for he could not conceive of himself as dead. So he devised a compromise; he conceded the fact of his own death as well, but denied it the significance of annihilation...It was beside the dead body of someone he loved that he invented spirits...His persisting memory of the dead became the basis for assuming other forms of existence and give him the conception of a life continuing after apparent death.<sup>27</sup>

In "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death", Freud further develops his thinking on post-mortem conceptions. Here, too, he declares that early humanity created the idea of a hereafter in response to the stark reality of death. "What came into existence beside the dead body of a loved one," he writes, "was... the doctrine of the soul and the belief in immortality."<sup>28</sup> He goes on further to explain:

It was only later that religions succeeded in representing this after-life as the more desirable, the truly valid one, and in reducing the life which is ended by death to a mere preparation. After this, it was no more than consistent to extend life backwards into the past, to form the notion of earlier existences, of the transmigration of souls and of reincarnation, all with the purpose of depriving death of its meaning as the termination of life.<sup>29</sup>

These two passages are characteristic of Freudian thought, and reflect the attitude towards life after death which has persisted during much of the twentieth century. Essentially, for Freud the very notion of life after death is a psychological creation of the human mind. To believe in an afterlife, or even to show any concern with ideas about heaven and the survival of the soul is a denial of the reality of death, a defense against the inherent fear of annihilation and extinction.

Freud's ideas on the afterlife influenced an entire generation of psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and other helping professionals, as well as philosophers and social scientists. As a result, until very recently, the whole topic of post-mortem survival has been ignored or regarded with great suspicion, or as an embarrassment, in psychology, philosophy and even theology.

There is no doubt the rationalistic, secularizing forces of the modern era have left their impact within the Jewish world. Even well before Freud, the materialistic, rationalistic view of the afterlife influenced the intellectual development of the German-Jewish philosopher, Hermann Cohen (1842-1918). As a leader of an entire generation of Neo-Kantian Jewish thinkers, Cohen was embarrassed by the Jewish doctrine of life after death.<sup>30</sup> In his classical study, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, Cohen reinterpreted traditional Jewish conceptions of immortality. The individual alone does not survive after death, he maintained, although a person's legacy does, as part of the evolving history of humanity: "only in the infinite development of the human race towards the ideal spirit of holiness can the individual soul actualize its immortality."<sup>31</sup> And Biblical metaphors for death such as "And thou shalt go to thy fathers," and "He is gathered to his people" he regarded as symbolic of "the historical living on of the individual in the historical continuity of the people."<sup>32</sup>

This belief, often referred to as "social immortality", has persisted for over a century, and become an increasingly widespread modern Jewish response. However, many people do not realize that this adaptation to the rationalist worldview completely ignores the traditional Jewish perspective that there is an immortal soul which survives bodily death. Even so-called experts within the Jewish world mistakenly promulgate the materialistic, rationalistic point of view in the public arena. As recently as 1989, when asked by a Newsweek journalist about Jewish views of afterlife, Rabbi Terry Bard, Director of Pastoral Services at Boston's Beth Israel Hospital explained that after the individual dies - dead is dead - "what lives on are the children and a legacy of good works."<sup>33</sup>

Given the intellectual climate of the past one hundred years, it is no wonder that the issue of life after death is problematic for modern Jews. But this is part of a larger spiritual alienation in which questions of faith, God, religious experience and the inner life are perplexing to an entire generation of Jews influenced by the intellectual climate of the past

century. Generally speaking, social issues, politics, education and fund-raising are given due consideration in Jewish communities and congregations. But spirituality, the experience of a personal, intimate relationship with God, and mystical exploration of the soul and its nature in life and death has not been high on the agenda of the North American Jewish community. However, this is beginning to shift. As we shall explore below, evidence suggests that an increasing interest in spirituality and spiritual renewal has taken root, at least within specific segments of the North American Jewish community.<sup>34</sup>

## **5. THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY**

Let us explore another factor affecting modern Jewish perspectives on life after death, by reflecting, somewhat speculatively, on the interaction between Judaism and ideas about life after death within Christianity.

For over a decade, I have worked as a Jewish death awareness educator, assisting people in wrestling with psychological and spiritual questions about death, dying and life after death. Whenever I ask individuals to explore the images they hold about the hereafter, what emerges are not Jewish ideas of the afterlife, but Christian ones. Invariably people imagine a radiant heaven with pearly gates populated by cherubic angels, and a subterranean hell, with a burning inferno, more often than not attended by an evil-looking task master who punishes the decrepit, sinful wicked. Even people who do not believe in an afterlife find that automatically such visual pictures emerge in their imagination. Why? Because such images are so deeply embedded into the consciousness of Western culture.

Reflect on this for a moment. Before reading on, conjure up in your mind a picture of how you envision the realms of heaven and hell? Notice what images come to mind... Do not read on yet, but take a moment and do this brief exercise now.

Do you see Adam? Abraham? Moses? The radiant presence of the Shechina, the divine feminine aspect of God? Seven regions of heaven? Seven realms of hell, presided over by the angel of death? These are the images found in Jewish sources. And yet, the likelihood is that the afterlife images which come to mind - for both Jews and non-Jews - are closer to medieval Christian art, than to the motifs represented in Jewish mysticism or legend. This exercise reveals the extent to which Christian notions of life after death have permeated Jewish awareness, at a very deep, unconscious level.

For almost two thousand years, eternal life, heaven and hell have been the predominant themes of Christian doctrine. From the very beginning, Christianity promised eternal life and a free ticket to paradise to anyone who repented in the name of Jesus Christ. During the second to fifth centuries, Christianity evolved from a marginal Jewish sect to the dominant religious authority in the Roman world. During this time, the Church Fathers, notably Irenaeus and St. Augustine, further expounded Christian creeds about an otherworldly paradise and the torments of hell.<sup>35</sup> In the thirteenth century, Dante's The Divine Comedy mapped out very exceptionally picturesque and graphic images of heaven and hell, which became canonical Christian dogma, promulgated throughout the Byzantine world and Europe. Eventually, Christianity's teachings on heaven and hell were depicted artistically in the creations of European painters such as Michaelangelo, Hieronymous Bosch, Jan van Eyck, William Blake, and others.<sup>36</sup> Because of the strong Biblical prohibition against graven images, Jews did not take to art in the same way as Christians did. Therefore, what was infused into the visual awareness of Western society were Christian afterlife beliefs, not those of the Jews. To this day, Christian images of life after death, and the philosophical ideas behind them, remain pervasive in the minds of both non-Jews and Jews.

When examining the history of Jewish-Christian relations, there is no doubt that Christianity's belief in eternal life impacted upon the Jews, but in a very negative sense. As a rule, when Jews refused to accept the promise of heavenly paradise and eternal life, in the name of the Messiah Jesus, they were ostracized, persecuted, tortured or put to death. And it was very common for Christian notions of heaven and hell to be employed in ways quite abusive to the Jews. The prevalent teaching for centuries was, that if an individual Jew did not embrace Christianity he or she was destined, not to the pearly gates of heaven, but to the damnation of hell. For example, in 1442, the Council of Florence proclaimed that: "none of those outside the Catholic Church, not Jews, nor heretics, nor schismatics, can participate in eternal life, but will go into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, unless they are brought into it [the Catholic Church] before the end of life."<sup>37</sup> This was five hundred years ago. And yet, to this day, this teaching is still remains infused in the minds of many Christians, in spite of the Second Vatican Council, and the ongoing contemporary efforts to eliminate anti-Semitism, and other forms of racism.

Centuries of anti-Jewish persecution left its toll in the modern Jewish psyche. In reaction to the omnipresence of Christian teachings on heaven and hell, it seems as if, collectively, many Jews have rejected, in totality, the whole idea of a post-mortem life. If the operating cultural assumption was that non-Christians could not enter heaven, then many Jews decided to completely opt out of the whole system, abandoning belief in both heaven and hell, and in a life after death all together.

We see this very overtly in the anecdote above-mentioned about the nurse who asked the rabbi if Judaism had a belief in the afterlife. The rabbi, you will recall, maintained that Judaism "dwells on life here rather than on the hereafter *as other religious faiths do*". What are the "other religious faiths" to which the rabbi is referring? Likely not Buddhism and Hinduism, but Christianity! In other words, its almost as if the underlying assumption expressed here is: "Christians believe in all that stuff about heaven, hell and eternal life. But we Jews don't!"

Just because Christianity ascribes to a belief in life after death, Judaism doesn't! On one hand, this is a totally absurd assumption, which ignores the legacy of three thousand years of Jewish writings on life after death. Yet, on the other hand, given the historical factors operating - the prevalence of Christian iconography of the afterlife in Western consciousness, the use of heaven and hell teachings as part of the systematic oppression of the Jews, and the increasingly inaccessibility of traditional Jewish teachings in modern times - it is little wonder this belief has been promulgated.

Not surprisingly, this view that Christians believe in the afterlife and Jews do not is substantiated by modern social science surveys. In 1952, a Gallup poll asked people the question: "Do you think that your soul will live on after death?" While 85% of the Catholics and 80% of the Protestants answered "Yes", by contrast only 35% of the Jews responded affirmatively. And in 1965, the numbers were even lower: 83% of the Catholics and 75% of the Protestants answered "Yes", but only 17% of Jewish respondents believed their soul would live on after death. The remaining 83% of the Jews polled either said "No!" or "Don't Know".

The comparative results of these two studies can be found in Table 1 below.<sup>38</sup>

RELIGION	1952			1965		
	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Catholics	85%	4%	11%	83%	3%	14%
Protestants	80%	5%	15%	78%	7%	15%
Jews	35%	24%	41%	17%	46%	37%

**TABLE 1: AFTERLIFE BELIEFS AMONG CATHOLICS, PROTESTANTS AND JEWS**

These comparative statistics are not insignificant. They suggest that Jews, dramatically more than Catholics and Protestants, have been affected by the secularizing tendencies of the modern period. But perhaps this can be explained even more clearly, by looking at another unique Jewish experience of the twentieth century - the Holocaust - which might further explain why modern Jews have quite ostensibly rejected the belief in the soul's survival after death.

## **6. IS THERE AFTERLIFE AFTER AUSCHWITZ?**

One other factor unconsciously influencing modern Judaism's perspective on life after death is the experience and impact of the Holocaust. Undeniably, the Holocaust has been a powerful force operating upon the psyche of twentieth century Jews. The overwhelming nature of the murder perpetuated against Jews, by the Nazis, has made it difficult for modern Jews to really reflect on the whole issue of life after death.

To understand this more fully, ask yourself the following question: "Is there afterlife after Auschwitz?" What a question! No doubt you have not heard that question asked before. Auschwitz evokes images of suffering and death. But after Auschwitz, the Jewish response is to focus energy on life and re-birth, not on the hereafter.

In the era immediate following the Holocaust, the mandate of the Jewish people was a very functional and practical one: to re-settle refugees, build a Jewish homeland, and guarantee the ongoing survival of Jewish life around the world. Imagine, or remember, what it was like in 1945, as the discovery and the liberation of concentration camps began. Could the task at hand have been accomplished if Judaism emphasized a philosophical preoccupation with the state of the souls of six million dead? What would have taken place in the years after World War II if Judaism had a proclivity to contemplate the



transcendental wanderings of the souls of six million dead Jews? Even now this is an awesome thought, that evokes a jarring sense of discomfort.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the memory of the six million was best honored by affirming the continuity of Jewish existence, not by focusing on the post-mortem fate of the dead. Such a mission was too monumental and too overwhelmingly painful to even contemplate! After Auschwitz, I maintain, it is difficult, if not impossible for Judaism, collectively, to relate to the idea of an afterlife. Modern Judaism - at least in the forty years after the liberation of the concentration camps - simply could not integrate the Jewish philosophy of the immortal soul with the reality of the Holocaust. So it was best ignored, left to the private sphere but not the public sphere of religious life, except for Yizkor services when the six million martyrs were remembered.

Looking retrospectively on the decades after World War II, it was quite utilitarian and adaptive for modern Judaism to lose touch with the legacy of Jewish teachings on the afterlife. The spirit of the times of the fifties, sixties and seventies necessitated building a socially responsive and intellectually viable Judaism. Within the context of a post-World War II North American Judaism, there has not been any room for a concern with spirituality and disembodied souls in the hereafter. It may well be that for many Jews, raised in the shadow of the Holocaust, there was simply no need for a philosophy of the afterlife.

In recent times, however, there has been a progressive yearning for spirituality and spiritual renewal. Standing on the threshold of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in a critical time of societal transformation and a revolution in human consciousness. Perhaps now, more than fifty years after the Holocaust, it is time to re-discover the Jewish spiritual legacy that was buried in the ashes of Auschwitz. In this era, as a more evolved and accepting approach to death, dying and bereavement is being developed in Western culture, the time is ripe for bringing to light the full legacy of Jewish teachings on death and the afterlife.

## **CULTURAL CONTEXT**

In defining the parameters of this book, we need to explore two important contemporary cultural trends which form the background to our investigation of life after

death in Judaism: i) the Jewish renewal movement, and, ii) thanatology, the interdisciplinary study of death and dying.

The first trend, the Jewish renewal movement, is best described as a contemporary concern with the renaissance of Jewish spirituality in the Jewish community. The second trend, thanatology, is a discipline of study in and of itself, and as a social movement can be regarded as the growing societal interest in all dimensions of death, dying and bereavement. Written at the crossroads of these two trail-blazing movements, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* is both a contribution to, and a product of the movement for Jewish renewal and contemporary thanatology.

## **1. THE JEWISH RENEWAL MOVEMENT**

Behind the writing of *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* is the overt influence of a new spirit emerging within contemporary Judaism, known as the Jewish renewal movement - a diverse movement of individuals and communities dedicated to the creative revitalization of all facets of Jewish spiritual life.

The Jewish renewal movement is both a social and a religious force. As a social force, this movement is creating new participatory forms of worship and celebration, and evolving an egalitarian, feminist Judaism in which women are participating in, and contributing to Jewish life as never before. As a religious force, this renewal movement is creating a new theological understanding of the meaning and role of religion in a person's life. The dualistic, human-divine understanding is being replaced by an imminent theology, which recognizes the inherent unity of the individual, the divine and the environment.

Earlier antecedents of this movement appeared in the 1960s, during the era of anti-war protest, psychedelic drugs and hippies. As a response to religious alienation within the synagogues, and the bureaucratic, hierarchical organization of Jewish community life, a "Jewish counter-culture" coalesced. In places like New York and Boston, jean-clad hippies, college students and their professors, mostly young people who had rejected the structures of the community, began evolving radical new forms of Jewish expression. In study, prayer and ritual celebration, the writings of individuals like Henry David Thoreau, Martin Luther King and Abby Hoffman, were fused with ancient teachings from the Hebrew Prophets and the Psalms. Reflecting the radical social consciousness of the times, this counter-cultural

movement planted the seeds of a unique American contribution to Jewish culture. Most noteworthy, during this era an important publication was conceived - *The Jewish Catalog*, a "do-it-yourself" manual for Jewish practice<sup>39</sup> - which has been a continuing source of inspiration to people searching for practical guidelines to the renewal of Judaism.

During the 1970's this revitalizing force in the Jewish world became known as "New Age Judaism". At this time, Eastern religions and the human potential movement had become very popular, attracting many Jewish adherents. Influenced largely by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, and the communities he founded such as the Aquarian Minyan of Berkeley, and B'nai Or Religious Fellowship, an innovative form of Judaism emerged, blending mystical Jewish traditions with Yoga, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Sufism and other esoteric paths, and the consciousness practices of humanistic and transpersonal psychology. Many who had studied with Eastern gurus and lamas, returned to the Jewish fold, practicing a renewed style of Judaism which emphasized meditation, spirituality and the pursuit of expanded consciousness, over and above, rationality and rote ritual.

Although certainly not a mainstream movement, "New Age Judaism" became a strong force for the re-discovery and resurrection and of the mystical, spiritual side of Judaism. Inspired by the new forms of Jewish spirituality pioneered in this period, many were challenged learn more of the Jewish past, and to bring to light treasured ancient resources of Jewish mysticism and spirituality. This process of re-claiming the spiritual legacy of the past has continued through the years, affecting Jewish learning, liturgy and practice.

Also during the 1970's, an entirely new phenomenon in American Jewish life appeared on the scene, the *Havurah*. Derived from a Hebrew word *haver*, "friend", *Havurah* literally means "fellowship", or "friendship circle". *Havurot* (plural) are small, communities of men and women who gather on a regular basis for prayer, Torah study, and the celebration of Shabbat, holy days and life cycle rituals. In contradistinction to the styles of mainstream congregations, *Havurot* tend to be empowering rather than alienating. They are usually peer led, and emphasize creative experimentation in liturgy, and a "do-it-yourself", participatory form of Jewish practice.

Although originally an outgrowth of the early counter-cultural movement, today there are both independent *Havurot*, and those operating in conjunction with existing synagogues. There also exist a number of different national organizations which serve to

network Havurot communities which have grown up in the United States, Canada, as well as in Israel, Europe and South America. The Havurah movement, as a whole, may be regarded as an early forerunner of the Jewish renewal movement. It was only in the early 1980's that the term "Jewish renewal" was first coined, to describe the process of individual empowerment and collective spiritual rebirth that had been in place for over fifteen years.

Today, the Jewish renewal movement synthesizes the various innovative trends which have emerged over the decades, and is articulating a vision of where Judaism is evolving in the twenty-first century. In a sense, Jewish renewal is a process of re-framing Jewish practice in light of the ancient wisdom of the past, and the emerging paradigm of the post-modern age. Jewish renewal also expresses the contemporary search for spiritual meaning characteristic of this time of history.

The post World War II promise that science would fulfill all human needs has not materialized. Even with all kinds of profound technological innovations - satellites, computers, fax machines, fibre optics, etc. - the quality of human life in the Western world continues to decline. There are drug wars on the streets, families continue to break up, fatal diseases like cancer and AIDS are spreading not disappearing, and of course, we are finally waking up to the extent of the toxicity of the earth and its atmosphere. With all this, and more, going on, an increasing number of people find themselves deeply questing for personal meaning. What's it really all about? The question is no longer: "Is God dead?" but rather, "How can I, as an individual, personally access God in my own life, and enhance the quality of life for myself and the people around me?" We are living in an age of transition characterized by spiritual thirst. People are longing for functional resources which offer meaning, a connection with the transcendent, and an ability to experience the deep layers of the human psyche, wherein genuine healing can be found.

In such a time of spiritual hunger, many alienated Jews are turning back to their roots. Even previously committed Jewish men and women are looking beyond the legalistic, rational dimensions of Judaism, for an internal experience of transformation. Many people, young and old alike, are searching to unearth the ancient wisdom of the Jewish past and make it viable for daily life in this age.

As a result of this questing, there is a burgeoning interest in the mystical, mythical and apocalyptic traditions of Judaism. As it turns out, there is so much more to Judaism than

meets the eye, so much that has been covered over by rationalism, secularization, and cultural assimilation. Through the process of Jewish renewal, scholars and practitioners alike are being motivated to unearth the sacred past. Over the past decade, more and more traditional Jewish texts have been translated into English, and this process is continuing. In addition, a number of leading Jewish teachers are creating a new genre of American Jewish spiritual writings. Topics such as mysticism, meditation, magic, folk religion, healing, altered states of consciousness, as well as reincarnation and life after death are emerging on the agenda of study, not only in small study circles, but also in well-respected academies of Jewish learning. Greater and greater numbers of Jews, as well as non-Jews are becoming passionately interested in the long-lost legacy of Jewish spirituality and mysticism.

Against this background, this book is being written. The spiritual search inherent to Jewish renewal has provided the impetus to ask the following questions: What is the ancient legacy of Jewish teachings on the afterlife? And, how can this heritage be made accessible and relevant to the contemporary world?

This book contributes to the work of Jewish renewal in three distinct ways. First of all, as survey of Jewish teachings on life after death through the ages, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* makes a substantial addition to the growing body of knowledge of Jewish spirituality and mysticism. In particular, little-known Kabbalistic and Midrashic teachings on the soul and its post-mortem destiny are mapped out here, designed to be accessible to all.

Secondly, this book is designed to present a contemporary contribution to Jewish thought. In the spirit of Jewish renewal, a contemporary model of the afterlife is developed, based upon the recent developments in transpersonal psychology and consciousness research. This model synthesizes the ancient past with the most innovative cultural trends, and in so doing attempts to facilitate the process of bringing Judaism and Jewish thought into the future.

Finally, Jewish renewal is interested in renewing traditional rituals to give them a sense of meaning, and in evolving new forms of practice that honor the individual need for spiritual fulfillment and understanding. The spiritually-oriented view of the afterlife presented in the final chapter is one which recognizes that consciousness survives bodily death. This point of view has implications in how we understand and practice the rituals

associated with dying and grieving. Awareness that a spiritual connection between the living and the deceased persists, even after death of the body, can totally transform the ways in which we look at every facet of the human encounter with death. The spiritual view of the afterlife developed in this book has the potential to re-invigorate and bring new meaning to all the traditional Jewish ritual practices of death and mourning, from dying and the deathbed, to burial, funeral and the various bereavement rituals of *shiva*, *kaddish*, *yahrzeit* and *yizkor*. In the long run, re-claiming the ancient Jewish tradition of the afterlife, and making it relevant to our times, will totally revolutionize the way Jewish communities care for the elderly, sick, dying and bereaved.

## **2. THANATOLOGY - THE INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF DEATH & DYING**

In the society at large, something of great significance is happening: slowly but surely death has come out of the closet! When the history of the twentieth century is written, the years after 1960 will be regarded as an extraordinary era in which the collective understanding of death was profoundly altered.

Behind this changing perspective on death is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry known as thanatology, the study of death and dying. Its name is derived from “Thanatos”, the mythological Greek god of death, who was a twin of Hypnus, the god of sleep.<sup>40</sup> A relatively-recent creation, thanatology is an amalgam of practitioners and scholars investigating all aspects of death, dying and bereavement. History, philosophy, religion, anthropology, sociology, parapsychology and consciousness research, as well the helping professions of psychology, social work, psychiatry, nursing and medicine intermingle in the quest to understand the multi-dimensional experience of death.

As a result of developments in thanatology over the past three decades, death has become a topic of significant social concern, and an area for study, research and professional training. For example, today there are probably more over two hundred thousand courses on death and dying taught annually, in the United States alone; and many more world wide.<sup>41</sup> Each year, hundreds of articles and scores of books on death, dying and related topics are published.<sup>42</sup> The professional field of thanatology is continually diversifying and permeating various humanistic and scientific disciplines.



Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a Swiss psychiatrist known to many as the "death and dying lady", has been at the forefront of the emergence of thanatology. Working against the tide of the medical establishment, she inaugurated the transformation of attitudes towards death in modern, industrialized society. Whereas sex was the cultural taboo in Victorian times, it was replaced in the twentieth century by the topic of death. As individuals like Geoffrey Gorer taught, by the mid- twentieth century death had become the pornography of society, a taboo area about people were profoundly afraid to speak.<sup>43</sup>

But Kubler-Ross is "the Sigmund Freud of Death and Dying". And just as Freud's theories on sexuality revolutionized cultural values and attitudes towards sex in the early part of this century, Kubler-Ross' pioneering work with the dying served to unlock the cultural taboo on death in the final decades of the twentieth century. Already her lifework revolutionized Western views of death, as profoundly as Freud catalyzed a revolution in sexuality and sexual mores. In the aftermath of Kubler-Ross, the taboo on death has been broken.

The story of Kubler-Ross' early work with dying patients is almost legendary in thanatological literature.<sup>44</sup> As a psychiatrist at the University of Chicago in the mid-1960s, Kubler-Ross went to hospital wards in search of dying patients to interview. She was repeatedly told: "We have no dying patients here." With both fear and denial pervasive in the medical profession, it was completely unheard of for a doctor to relate to terminal patients in terms of their personal experience of dying.

Kubler-Ross persisted. She began to receive an increasing number of referrals, and was soon dedicating her time to interviewing terminal patients to understand what it was like for those approaching death. From a simple willingness to listen to dying people, Kubler-Ross inaugurated a growing cultural movement concerned with improving the quality of life for the dying and bereaved and their families.

Kubler-Ross' work with terminal patients, dying children, and more recently with persons with AIDS, has continually challenged the cultural fear and denial of death. Undoubtedly, the seed planted single-handedly by Kubler-Ross in the 1960s, took root in the 1970s, and multiplied and proliferated in the 1980s and beyond. Over the years, as a result of Kubler-Ross' pioneering work, there has been an exponential increase in human

knowledge about death and mourning, coupled with significant developments in the area of thanatological care for the dying and bereaved.

Today there is a much greater honesty and openness in the face of death. Dying individuals are given more opportunity to speak openly about their feelings with family members and attending medical staff. More and more frequently, conscious effort is made to meet the social, emotional and spiritual needs of the dying, along with the medical and physical ones. Generally, there is a marked concern for enhancing the quality of life for dying individuals, whether they are in hospital settings, or in the home.

In terms of bereavement, Kubler-Ross also had an important impact. There was a time when people tip-toed around those in mourning, speaking in hushed tones, not wanting to upset them by bringing up the subject of death or grief. Today, we understand more clearly how important it is for bereaved individuals to tell their grief story, over and over again if necessary. Increasingly, there is a growing number of resources available to meet the needs of the bereaved and well as a growing cadre of helping professionals who are able to diagnose and treat the many different aspects of bereavement. Even the "Bible of psychiatry", DSM-III, listed "Normal Bereavement Reaction" as a classification of mental health, giving due understanding to the serious and transitional nature of the bereavement experience.<sup>45</sup>

On the whole, medical and mental health professionals, as well as clergy, are now being taught how to relate more effectively with the dying and bereaved, learning to enter into their world and understand the emotional and psychological experiences associated with death and grief. There are also greater numbers of professional education conferences dealing specifically with the whole area of death care. And finally, numerous innovative community programs have been created to meet deal with the needs of dying and bereaved individuals, and their families. Residential and home hospice centers, bereavement support groups, grief counseling clinics, and death awareness education programs run by hospitals, social work agencies, even funeral directors have become increasingly common, even in times of constricted funding. Clearly, Kubler-Ross has had her impact.

Even more than all of this, there are a variety of new developments forcing people to re-think questions about the meaning of life and death itself. Biotechnological advances such as heart transplants, frozen embryos and suicide machines, make it clear that science is not

value neutral and, as a culture we need to evolve bioethics and spiritual principles corresponding with the evolution of our technology. And "near death experiences", the visionary reports of people who have been declared clinically dead and then brought back to life, have forced medical doctors and scientists to re-open the whole question about life after death, and re-think the materialistic definition of death. We are seeing an increasing integration of ancient wisdom with modern science, and as a consequence radical new perspectives are being developed not only on the dying process, but about that which occurs after death.

Almost three decades after Kubler-Ross, even though thanatology may not be a household term, nonetheless it is obvious that there has been a significant shift away from the fear and denial of death, towards a more accepting, compassionate view of human mortality. Even more, changing perspectives on death have penetrated popular culture. The reality of AIDS, and the tragic deaths of so many cultural heroes from this devastating disease, has forced people to talk and think about death and mortality. Prime time television characters now openly struggle with grief and loss. Bereaved and terminally ill people parade before talk show hosts for nationally broadcast rap sessions about parental grief, suicide, SIDS, and a variety of other types of bereavement. And in recent years, a spate of movies have attempted to depict visions of the survival of the soul after death.

We are in the midst of a total cultural transformation which is bringing about the emergence of a revised understanding of death and dying. In place of the materialistic view that biological death is the final end of life, a spiritual view of death and life, is emerging. Increasingly, a new paradigm is being articulated in the mental health professions, and the biological sciences, one which gives due recognition to the perennial wisdom of the ages, encoded in the esoteric traditions of the world, and understands that death is not the end of life but merely a transition to a different state of consciousness.

Against this background, there is little doubt that Judaism, in the fullness of its ancient wisdom, has a contribution to make to the new ways of understanding the experiences of dying and death. And it is the intention of this book to articulate the contribution which Judaism can make to this new understanding.

### **3. KUBLER-ROSS, HOLOCAUST AND A NEW JEWISH VISION OF THE AFTERLIFE**

As a book written at the crossroads of thanatology, and the contemporary renewal of Jewish spirituality, there is one other anecdote that needs to be told. There is a story recounted by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross herself, suggesting that seeds for the rebirth of the Jewish approach to the afterlife may have emerged out of the Holocaust itself.

Kubler-Ross tells of her experiences as a relief worker in the Maidanek concentration camp. It was at Maidanek, in 1945, that Kubler-Ross became fascinated with the mystery of the human encounter with death. Surveying the vacant Maidanek, she was overwhelmed by the shadow of death - the ever-present stench in the air, the chimney of the crematorium, the barbed wire, the boxes of baby shoes, jewelry and women's hair, and above all, the scribbling found on the walls of the empty barracks. There amid the graffiti and hundreds of initials carved into the five-tiered wooden bunks, she noticed countless drawings of butterflies! Perhaps days or only hours before dying in the gas chambers, adults and children left behind their final message - butterflies - the symbol of hope, rebirth, the symbol of the eternal human soul. This curious juxtaposition of images of life and death left a profound impression upon the young Kubler-Ross, and, ultimately motivated her to study death and dying.<sup>46</sup>

Oddly enough, on one hand it was the Holocaust itself that obliterated traditional Jewish life of Eastern Europe, wiping out so many of the spiritual leaders who had direct access to Judaism's sacred legacy of mystical teachings about the soul, and its afterlife pilgrimage. In a strange way, its almost as if the Jewish afterlife, and the spiritual worldview behind those holy teachings died in Nazi death camps. On the other hand, the tragedy of the Holocaust left a profound impression on young Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, inspiring and catalyzing her life work investigating the mysteries of dying and death. Perhaps like the phoenix rising from the ashes, Kubler-Ross' work in contemporary thanatology nows gives us the motivation and inspiration to re-claim, to resurrect Judaism's spiritual approach to death and the afterlife.

And yet, even though in the aftermath of "the Kubler-Ross death and dying revolution" there have been thousands and thousands of new publications documenting medical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, and spiritual perspectives on death and dying,

within the Jewish community relatively little new material has been written in the past three decades.<sup>47</sup> Kubler-Ross herself noted the surprising dearth of modern Jewish death literature:

I have always wondered why the Jews as a people have not written more on death and dying. Who, better than they, could contribute to understanding of the need to face the reality of our own finiteness?<sup>48</sup>

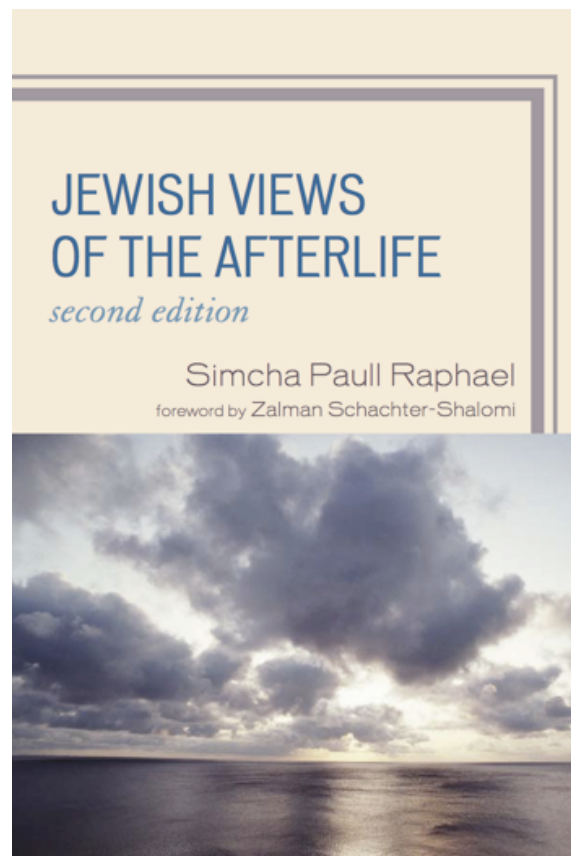
Even with Kubler-Ross' cultural influences, the psychic grip of the Holocaust has pervaded and Jews have avoided writing on death, dying and the afterlife. But this dearth of Jewish writings on death - like the view that Jews do not believe in an afterlife - is a modern phenomenon. Throughout the history of Judaism, Jewish sages have authored all types of resources not only on the afterlife, but on all aspects of the encounter with death. Perhaps now, as a new millenium dawns, it is time to begin unbind the psychic shackles of the Holocaust, and begin a process of integrating traditional Jewish wisdom on death, dying, mourning and the spiritual journey of the soul in the afterlife with new emerging perspectives on the psychology of death and dying.

Circumstances of the times necessitate re-claiming the wisdom of Jewish death traditions. We are living through an era in which people live longer and, as a result, there is an increased concern with both the quality of life, and the quality of death! Within the Jewish community there are increasing numbers of elderly Jews, and this will be the trend of the coming decades, as the baby boom generation deals with parents who are aging and dying. In our communities, the debilitating illnesses of Alzheimers, cancer and AIDS continue to directly affect the lives of countless families. As a society, we desperately need all the information and resources available to enable us to deal more effectively with the human death.

There is a great need today for a spiritually-oriented, community-based approach to death and dying. The spirit of the times requires a conscious method for empowering individuals and families to deal effectively with terminal illness, dying, funerals, mourning and bereavement. I believe that one of the best ways to meet this need in this era is to bring to life the rich, unmined legacy of Jewish afterlife teachings. These are found not only in the Bible, Rabbinic literature, and in Maimonides, but also in ancient Jewish apocalyptic

writings, in medieval Midrash, the Zohar and other texts of Jewish mysticism, and in the teachings of the Hasidic masters.

Yes, Judaism does believe in an afterlife! Sixty years after Auschwitz it is time to resurrect the ancient Jewish tradition on the afterlife journey of the soul, and to make those teachings available in a language and style appropriate for contemporary Jewish life, in the metaphor of the psychology of consciousness. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* may well be sufficient for Tibetan monks. But now there is a need to develop a Jewish Book of the Dead, or perhaps more appropriately a Jewish *Book of Life* that will be a guide and a manual for dying Bubbys and Zaidyes and their children and grandchildren. Now we need to bring to life Jewish wisdom on the mysteries of death and the immortal soul, so that the next generation of Jewish life will be lived with greater fullness and with a profound sense of the spiritual significance of life and death. Writing the book *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* is one man's humble attempt in that direction.



# ***Jewish Views of the Afterlife***

## ***by Simcha Paull Raphael, Ph.D.***

***Does Judaism believe in life after death? Once you read this book you will never again say “no!” in answer to this frequently-asked question!***

***JEWISH VIEWS OF THE AFTERLIFE is a unique historical and philosophical study tracing the evolution of ideas of individual postmortem survival in Judaism. Surveying a far-ranging assortment of texts on life after death in Bible, Apocrypha, Rabbinic literature, medieval philosophy, medieval legendary Midrash, and Jewish mystical traditions of Kabbalah and Hasidism, this book presents an extensive portrayal of the changing notions of life after death over a period of almost four millennia.***

***The second edition includes an updated preface, and a new chapter on ways of renewing contemporary Jewish death rituals based on a spiritual view of Jewish teachings on death and afterlife.***

***“Jewish Views of the Afterlife introduces readers to previously inaccessible parts of the Jewish tradition. As Dr. Simcha Raphael mines the riches of afterlife visions, he offers new vistas of hope and comfort in confronting death and dying. This new edition's practical guidance for integrating these insights into spiritual care with dying and grieving individuals and families is invaluable.”—Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman, author, Jewish Visions for Aging: A Professional Guide for Fostering Wholeness***

***“Can we imagine a Jewish Dante? Jewish Views of the Afterlife challenged prevailing contemporary assumptions about Judaism as a religion focused on life, not death, a religion opposed to all 'otherworldly' speculations. Now, with a second edition of this landmark book, readers can ponder and wonder afresh what it means to accept an 'afterlife,' and how such a worldview might influence the daily lives and experiences of those who hold it. This book is a model of how to present the richness and strangeness of a religious tradition's teachings, to a wide audience, in a thoroughly readable style.”—Lucy Bregman, Temple University***

***“Simcha Paull Raphael has performed an act of resurrection. He has restored the rich heritage of Jewish thought about life after death that has been repressed, disdained, or ignored for so long and he has made the heritage accessible for the first time to a new generation of Jews.”—Rabbi Jack Riemer***

***“[Simcha Paull Raphael] traces, in a synoptic style, 4,000 years of Jewish thought on the afterlife by investigating pertinent sacred texts produced in each era. From the Bible, Apocrypha, rabbinic literature, medieval philosophy, medieval Midrash, Kabbalah, and Hasidism, the reader learns how Judaism conceived of the fate of the individual after death throughout Jewish history.” — Association of Jewish Libraries***

# May the Angels Carry You: Jewish Songs of Comfort for Death, Dying and Mourning

By  
Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael

THIS COLLECTION OF SONGS and prayers is based upon the cycle of traditional Jewish liturgical moments dealing with death and loss.

Heartfelt and contemplative, these various songs were recorded in response to real life events of grief and transition. Several selections are designed to support the needs of the dying and their loved ones - chants and prayers for the deathbed. Other songs can be used to console and support grieving family and friends and to provide *nichum*



*avelim* - comfort for the bereaved. These songs can also be incorporated into funeral and *shiva* rituals.

This collection of contemporary liturgical songs expands the repertoire for cantors, rabbis, members of the *hevre kaddisha*, chaplains, caregivers and others involved in this holy work.

For information on album purchase and lyrics see  
[www.shechinah.com](http://www.shechinah.com)



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this chapter was published as "Is There Afterlife After Auschwitz? Reflections on Jewish Views of Life After Death in the Twentieth Century" in *Judaism- A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought and Response*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Fall 1992), 346-360.

<sup>2</sup>This story is found in: Stephen Levine, *Who Dies? An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1982), p. 272.

<sup>3</sup>This quote appeared in 1981 in a newspaper article about a rabbi who had given a lecture on the Jewish approach to Bio-Medical Ethics. When asked by a young nurse, "Does Judaism believe in an afterlife?", he responded as quoted here. Jean Herschaft, "Patient Should Not Be Told of Terminal Illness: Rabbi," *The Jewish Post and Opinion* (New York), 13 March 1981, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>There is a Rabbinic teaching that proclaims: "Better is one hour of bliss in the World to Come than the whole of life in this world." However, this statement is immediately followed by the claim that "Better is one hour of repentance and good works in this world than the whole life of the World to Come (M. Avot 4: 17). The juxtaposition of these two ideas in the same place, serves to emphasize that embodied, physical plane life does have a primary value in the Jewish schema of things.

<sup>5</sup>Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Death As Homecoming" in Jack Riemer, ed., *Jewish Reflections on Death* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 73.

<sup>6</sup>Aaron Berechia ben Moshe Mi'Modina, *Maavor Yabok* (B'nai Brak: Yishpah, 1967).

<sup>7</sup>Jacob R. Marcus, *Communal Sick-Care in the German Ghetto* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1947), pp. 229-230.

<sup>8</sup>Menasseh ben Israel, *Nishmat Hayyim* (New York: Sinai Offset, n.d.; originally published Amsterdam, 1651)

<sup>9</sup>For biographical information see: Cecil Roth, *A Life of Menasseh Ben Israel* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1934).

<sup>10</sup>Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1954). *Ibid*, *The Paradiso*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1961). *Ibid*, *The Purgatorio*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1961).

<sup>11</sup>Dov Yardin, ed. *Mahbarot Immanuel HaRomi*, 2 Volumes (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1954), II, pp. 511-554.

<sup>12</sup> But this is not only a problem of language. It is more complex, as we shall see. Even in modern day Israel, where Hebrew is the predominant language, it is often difficult to find in bookstores copies of medieval texts on life after death. And topics such as the soul's post-mortem destiny, Gehenna, Gan Eden and reincarnation are not high on the agenda in the Orthodox, Yeshiva world.

<sup>13</sup>See Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 99-181.

<sup>14</sup>R. H. Charles, *Eschatology: The Doctrine of a Future Life in Israel, Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), pp. 19-20. Originally published in 1899, Charles' book is one of the classical studies of afterlife teachings in Biblical times.

<sup>15</sup>Herschel J. Matt, "An Outline of Jewish Eschatology." *Judaism* 17, 2 (Spring 1968), 186-196.

<sup>16</sup>Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Vol. I: *The Book of Knowledge*, trans. and ed., Moses Hyamson (Jerusalem: Boys Town Publishers, 1965, p. 91a.

<sup>17</sup>Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969), p. 225.

<sup>18</sup>Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism*, trans. Victor Grubenwieser and Leonard Pearl (New York: Schocken Books, 1948; 1976) p. 185.

<sup>19</sup>Sir George James Frazer, *The Belief in Immortality and the Worship of the Dead*, 3 Volumes (London: Dawsons, 1968).

<sup>20</sup>A. Rust, "Der primitive Mensch" in *Propylden Weltgeschichte*, ed. G. Mann and T. Heuss, Berlin, 1961, Vol. I, p. 194, quoted by Hans Kung, *Eternal Life?*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1974), p. 51.

<sup>21</sup>Ian Wilson, *The After Death Experience* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1987) pp. 7-26.

<sup>22</sup>See Mircea Eliade, *Death, Afterlife and Eschatology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967, 1974); and Stanislav and Christina Grof, *Beyond Death - The Gates of Consciousness* (New York: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1980).

<sup>23</sup>Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not A Christian* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1957), p. 45

<sup>24</sup>Quoted by John Bowker, *The Meanings of Death* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 6.

<sup>25</sup>Max Schur, *Freud: Living and Dying* (New York: International Universities Press, 1972), p. 136

<sup>26</sup>Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1961; originally published 1927).

<sup>27</sup>Freud, "Totem and Taboo," *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974) 13:1-161, 1913; quoted by Schur, p. 298.

<sup>28</sup>Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" *Standard Edition* 14:273-302, 1915.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>Allan Arkush, "Immortality" in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, eds. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mender-Flohr (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987) , pp. 479-482.

<sup>31</sup>Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, (1971), p. 308; quoted by Arkush, p. 481.

<sup>32</sup>Cohen, p. 301, quoted by Arkush, p. 481.

<sup>33</sup>Kenneth L. Woodward, "Heaven", *Newsweek*, (March 27, 1989) pp. 52ff.

<sup>34</sup> See Arthur Waskow, *These Holy Sparks - The Rebirth of the Jewish People* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983). See also David Teutsch, ed. *Imagining the Jewish Future: Essays and Responses* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>35</sup>See Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) pp. 47-68. See also Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>36</sup>See, for example Richard Cavendish, *Visions of Heaven and Hell* (London: Orbis, 1977); and Robert Hughes, *Heaven and Hell in Western Art* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968).

<sup>37</sup>Quoted by Kung, p. 130.

<sup>38</sup>George Gallup, *Adventures in Immortality* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1982), pp. 212. Another survey of American beliefs about life after death was done in 1980-81. However , unlike the earlier polls, this one was not broken down according to religion. In this study, Gallup indicates that nationwide, 67% of Americans believe in life after death, 27% do not; and 6% have no opinion. *Ibid*, p. 183.

<sup>39</sup>Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld and Sharon Strassfeld, eds. *The First Jewish Catalog*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973).

<sup>40</sup>Edwin S. Shneidman, ed., *Death: Current Perspectives* (Palo Alto, Ca.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1976), p. xvii.

<sup>41</sup>In 1981, the figure of 125,00 was presented by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. The figure of 200,000 is a projected estimate, based upon this earlier figure. See "Playboy Interview: Elisabeth Kubler-Ross", *Playboy* (November 1981), 96ff.

<sup>42</sup>According to *Psychological Abstracts*, there are between 100-150 articles per year listed under the heading "Death and Dying". Two bibliographies on thanatological literature, one by Kutsher, et al., and one by Miller and Acri, list 4844 and 3848 entries, respectively.

See Martin L. Kutsher, et al., *A Comprehensive Bibliography of Thanatology Literature* (New York: MSS Information Corporation, 1975); and, Albert J. Miller and Michael James Acri, *Death: A Bibliographical Guide* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1977).

<sup>43</sup>Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967).

<sup>44</sup>Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1970), p. 23.

<sup>45</sup>American Psychiatric Association, *DSM III-R* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 3rd ed., Rev., 1987), classification number V62.82.

<sup>46</sup>This story is related in Riemer, p. 1, and Derek Gill, *Quest - The Life of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), p. 131.

<sup>47</sup>Two notable exceptions to the prevalent dearth of Jewish writings on the spirituality of death and afterlife are: Rifat Sonsino and Daniel B. Syme, *What Happens After I Die?* (New York: UAHC Press, 1990); and Anne Brener, *Mourning and Mitzvah* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993). The latter is one of the most exciting new contributions to Jewish perspectives on death.

<sup>48</sup>Riemer, p. 2.