



***KING DAVID MEMORIAL CHAPEL TO SPONSOR
SCHOLAR-IN-RESIDENCE WEEKEND
Reb Simcha Raphael to Discuss “Judaism and the
Mysteries of Life, Death and the World Beyond”***

By Pamela K. Poster

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We don't like to talk about it.

It's not as if we are naïve and imagine that it will never happen. We all know the tag-line: “No one gets out of this life alive.”

But we don't like to talk about it.

“I don't think anybody is comfortable talking about death and dying,” said Rabbi Yocheved Mintz of Congregation P'nei Tikvah, “but it's an important conversation to have, especially for those who are in the process of dying and for those who care for them.”

In fact, she believes that the conversation is so important that she has partnered with Congregation Ner Tamid, King David Memorial Chapel and the Board of Rabbis of Southern Nevada to host a very special Scholar-in-Residence weekend entitled “JUDAISM AND THE MYSTERIES OF LIFE, DEATH AND THE WORLD BEYOND” with the foremost speaker on the subject, Reb Simcha Raphael, Ph.D., of the DA'AT(Death Awareness, Advocacy and Training) Institute in Philadelphia.

From Jan. 20-22, Reb Raphael will share his thoughts and experiences during four unique programs on the topic of life, death and the afterlife. During Friday Shabbat services at CNT, Reb Raphael will deliver his d'var Torah, “JOSEPH'S BONES AND THE JEWISH TRADITION OF MEMORY.” On Saturday, he will make two presentations: he will discuss “AFTERLIFE: JOURNEY OF THE JEWISH SOUL IN KABBALAH” during morning services, and “TWILIGHT BETWEEN WORLDS: TALES OF GHOSTS, WANDERING SPIRITS AND REINCARNATING SOULS” in the afternoon. On Sunday, he will address an interfaith audience of caregivers, medical personnel and funeral professionals at King David on the topic “JACOB'S DEATHBED DRAMA: GUIDELINES FROM GENESIS FOR CONSCIOUS LIVING AND CONSCIOUS DYING.” All programs are free and open to the public.

“We hope that each of the events will appeal to a slightly different audience,” said Rabbi Sanford Akselrad of Congregation Ner Tamid. “Reb Raphael is able to address a variety of aspects on death and dying; he has answers to many frequently asked questions; and he can discuss what our Jewish tradition says about customs of life and death, as well as many Kabbalistic ideas.”

Those answers come from Reb Raphael’s own personal experiences with death and his own personal search for answers within the Jewish tradition.

“I was only 21 years old when my best friend was killed in a car accident,” he recalled. “I needed answers, but the more I looked for answers and reasons within my tradition, the less I found.”

He found that commentary on death, especially on tragic death, was “embarrassingly apologetic” within modern American Jewish culture.

“I had many questions, but no answers,” he explained. “I was sad, I was angry. I didn’t understand. And nothing could provide me with the answers I needed. So I started doing research to see if I could find a traditional Jewish perspective on the subject.”

And through years of research, he found what he had searched for. From the beginnings of the Jewish community up through the late 1800’s, Jewish culture was rich with stories about the soul and the afterlife.

“Think of the ‘Fruma Sarah’ nightmare scene in ‘Fiddler on the Roof,’” Reb Raphael offered, “or the 1937 Yiddish film, ‘The Dybbuk.’ Belief in spirits and ghosts was part of our folk tradition. In the 12th century, even belief in reincarnation was as kosher as Mogen David wine!”

That type of folk tradition, based on mysticism and midrash, had created a vibrant belief system of life-after-death for many Jews, and it provided answers to their questions about death and dying. But those answers, which fit so easily into the Eastern European shtetl, seemed out of place in the modern world of America.

“We threw those stories into the harbor when we arrived at Ellis Island,” Reb Raphael explained. “They seemed too old-world, too unsophisticated for America. So we left those ideas in Europe and began to look for more scientific explanations based on rational, secular thinking.”

Reb Raphael admits that the modern scientific, psychological approach to death and dying has its place in the modern society. After years of academic study, he earned his doctorate in psychology in 1986, for which he wrote his dissertation on the subject of death and dying. Eight years later, he published his first book, “Jewish Views of the Afterlife.”

“It was the book I would have wanted to read when I was 21, when I lost my best friend,” he said.

The answers to the questions, Reb Raphael believes, is a blending of traditional beliefs and modern understandings.

“Our scientific, psychological approach to grief and death are helpful to many people,” he said, “but we lost something deeply rooted in our Jewish culture when, in our effort to leave the old world behind and embrace the new world, we threw out the baby with the bath water.”

He was not the only Jew to feel that way. As a member of the ‘baby-boomer’ generation, he was one of many Jews who felt that something was missing from the modern world.

“We [baby-boomers] had no real clear information or data, and so we set off on a spiritual search,” he explained. “By the 1980’s and 90’s, Kabbalah had returned, and we found ourselves at a cross of a scientific, psychological view of death and dying and the renewal of Jewish mysticism and spiritual ideas.”

With this two-tiered approach to understanding dying, death, and life-after-death, Reb Raphael began his professional career.

“My first job was as a psychologist in a Jewish funeral home,” he shared. He has also served as a death awareness educator, a bereavement counselor, and hospice chaplain, and is now a public speaker who brings to this subject decades of experience.

From the perspective of Jay Poster, Founder and General Manager of King David, this unique set of qualifications makes Reb Raphael a perfect expert to address end-of-life professionals in the Las Vegas community on the subject of Biblical traditions in modern society.

“Those of us in the funeral industry know that the time between death and burial can be very stressful for the families,” Poster said. “If Reb Raphael can provide hospice workers, physicians and caregivers with the tools to help the grieving families through that process, it will benefit them and the families they serve.”

While there are many well-trained, experienced, educated members of the clergy in Southern Nevada, Rabbi Mintz believes that Reb Raphael has a unique approach to what can be a difficult topic to discuss, even for members of the Rabbinate.

“Even we (clergy) sometimes struggle with the topic,” she admitted. “But Reb Raphael shares many anecdotes from his experience as a bereavement counselor, and people are pleasantly surprised by his approach.”

Rabbi Mintz continued, explaining that “the more we know about the process of death, the more it helps to allay our fears.”

All four components of the Scholar-in-Residence program are free and open to the public. For more information, call Congregation Ner Tamid at (702) 733-6292 or King David Memorial Chapel at (702) 464-8570