

A counselor aims to revive the afterlife



Simcha Raphael wants to restore lost beliefs on death and grieving

by [Johanna Ginsberg](#)
NJJN Staff Writer

January 14, 2015

Simcha Raphael has a deep faith in the Jewish idea of the afterlife.

“In Judaism, death is a window, not a wall,” he said in a telephone interview during a break in a five-day graduate workshop he was leading on death and dying at La Salle University in Philadelphia. “Unlike science, where dead is dead and there ain’t nothing happening, in Judaism, as with most religions, the world of the living and the world of the dead are connected.”

A therapist and “rabbinic pastor,” Raphael is the author of *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* and founder of the Da’at (Death Awareness, Advocacy & Training) Institute; it offers educational programs, training for clergy and health-care professionals, and bereavement support services.

His work draws on research he did as a graduate student and after, inspired by the late Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, founder of the Jewish Renewal movement. The



Dr. Simcha Raphael says, “In Judaism, death is a window, not a wall.”

If you go

Who: Rabbi Dr. Simcha Raphael

What: Judaism and the Mysteries of Life, Death and the World Beyond

Where: Temple Ner Tamid, Bloomfield

When: Friday-Saturday, Jan. 16-17

Friday, 6:30 p.m. — Joseph's Bones and the Jewish Tradition of Memory

Saturday, 10 a.m. — Moses' Death in Torah and Midrash

Afternoon — Afterlife Journey of the Soul in Jewish Mysticism, Lunch & Learn (lunch is free but RSVP required)

4:30 p.m. — Twilight Between Worlds: Tales of Ghosts, Spirits and Reincarnating Souls

Information: Call 973-338-1500

All lectures are free and open to the public.

ALEPH alliance, which carries on Schachter-Shalomi's work, ordains "pastors" to serve as chaplains, officiants, and prayer leaders.

Raphael's focus, in keeping with his Jewish Renewal approach, is on reinterpreting mystical approaches to the afterlife. As a bereavement therapist, he said, he recognizes that the concept of afterlife can provide comfort. "One of the hardest experiences with grief is that the person is gone forever. Grief happens, and I'm not going to glorify it. Grief is very painful — and very real," he said. "And with no cognitive religious framework for a connection between loved ones and oneself after death, in terms of grief that's a very important issue. And Judaism is actually hardwired with the afterlife."

He will be exploring death, dying, and the afterlife in a series of talks at a scholar-in-residence program at Temple Ner Tamid in Bloomfield Friday-Saturday, Jan. 16-17 (see box).

Raphael remembers feeling the presence of his grandmother when he was a child, and continues to feel the presence of his parents as well as his childhood best friend, who died in a car accident at 21. "Death has been a frequent visitor in my life," he said.

According to Raphael, rabbis too often train their focus on the rituals of death and dying and less on the spiritual needs of mourners. "Through the 1960s and '70s, in the North American Jewish experience, a lot of mystical stuff — spirits, angels, even God — was not on the agenda," he said. "But now we are part of an era of spiritual renewal and we are reclaiming a lot of the traditions. One of these is life after death."

Such beliefs were central to Jewish folk religion in the recent past, he said. "Think of Fruma Sarah from *Fiddler on the Roof*, who comes back from the grave in a dream. Those images were normative in a different period of time. We have these images in Judaism. We don't need Shirley MacLaine" — who famously believes in reincarnation — "and the Tibetan Book of the Dead."

According to tradition, familiar rituals like Kaddish and Yizkor are not just for the living, but for the deceased. Such prayers are believed to help elevate the soul of those who have died; even ending shiva with a walk around the block is a gesture intended to escort the soul on its journey.

Traditional Jewish sources refer to *olam haba* — the world to come. But with the exception of mystical texts and hasidic tales, definitive details are scarce, and the depictions provided by literature are often conflicting. Texts refer to Sheol, a dark pit where the dead exist in some shadowy form; Gehenna, a place where souls stay for 12 months of purification and/or punishment; and Gan Eden, sometimes considered roughly akin to

heaven, other times strictly reserved for messianic times.

Raphael offers his own modern interpretation: “Life after death is not a geographic location. Death is a series of journeys, of leaving. First there’s a letting go of our attachment to the body. Then there is a clearing of unresolved issues in Gehenna. In my view, it’s more cleansing than torture, more rehabilitation than penal colony.

“Third is harvesting one’s spiritual attributes — what we’ve accrued — as I like to say, how much money is in our spiritual bank account. Is it enough for a Motel 6 or a fancy apartment? There are seven realms of Gan Eden we go to based on our level of spiritual development.

“And finally,” he said, “there’s a return to God. There is an incredible range of belief, but this is a template.”

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