

Making the case for a Jewish afterlife

Ancient teachings "help us to understand some of our concerns about dying and death," a psychotherapist says.

By Naomi Geschwind
FOR THE INQUIRER

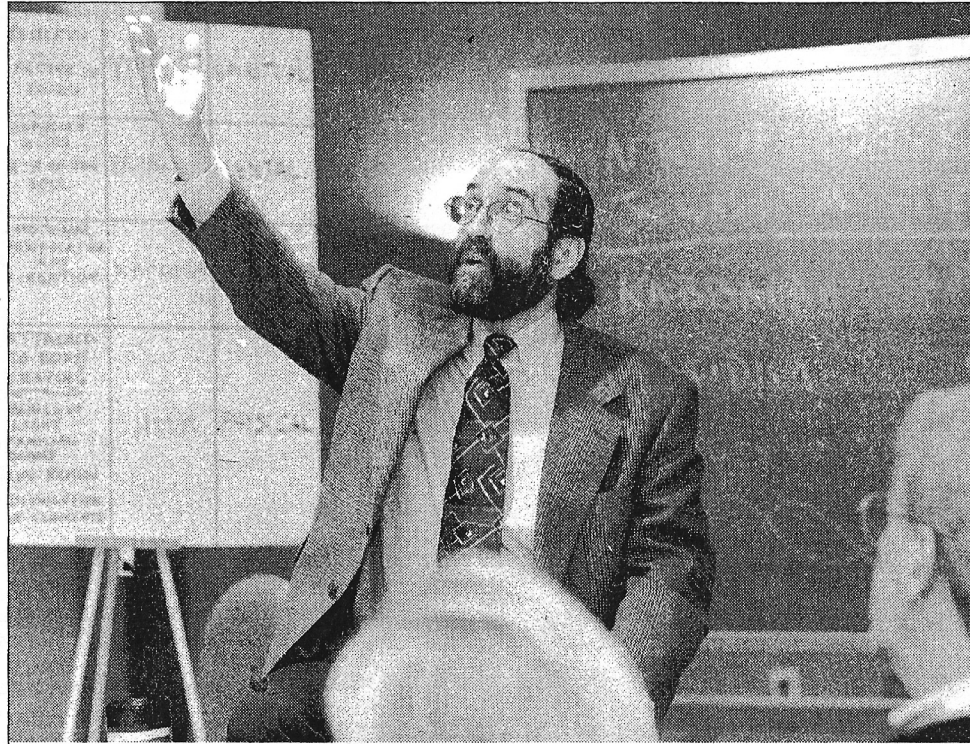
It was a year to the day after the death of his best friend in a car accident in 1973 that Simcha Paull Raphael gave his first class on Jewish views of the afterlife. Over the years, the subject has become his life's mission — and most students still have the same first reaction: "I thought Judaism didn't believe in an afterlife."

Those are the very words Gloria Goldberg of West Chester uses to explain why she and her husband, Martin, signed up for Raphael's class on the subject. On a recent Tuesday evening, the pair joined 20-odd congregants at Main Line Reform Temple, in Wynnewood, to hear a wealth of classical teachings about which, Raphael estimates, 80 percent of Jews are clueless.

It is because this important subject is so little known that Raphael travels the country, trying to reach the broadest possible audience. Author of *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, a 475-page volume published by Jason Aronson, he says the ancient teachings "help us to understand some of our concerns about dying and death."

Raphael, 47, who practices psychotherapy in Mount Airy, knows the concerns firsthand. His doctoral dissertation was on "Judaism's contribution to the psychology of death and dying." Later, he worked as a bereavement counselor.

Judaism has long downplayed the afterlife in favor of *mitzvot*, or holy acts, in this world. But without having knowledge of the age-old beliefs, Raphael says, Jews sometimes respond to common mourning "experiences" — such as the appearance of the departed in a dream — by turning to New Age philosophies and other religions.



ROSE HOWERTER / Inquirer Suburban Staff

Simcha Paull Raphael, at Main Line Reform Temple, explains Jewish teachings on the steps of the soul's journey after death. Most Jews are clueless on the topic, he says.

Helping Jews put the subject into a Jewish context is important, says Lynne Iser of Germantown's Spiritual Eldering Institute, an organization that teaches interfaith courses on death and dying and helps people develop an end-of-life philosophy that "resonates" with them. She said Raphael's book is the only Jewish title on the institute's bibliography.

Among Jews of the baby-boom generation, "there's still a tendency for our communal life to be focused on family and children, and we have not yet reached the point where we can focus on elders," says Iser. As a result, Iser says, "until the synagogue population gets older," teaching anything about the afterlife will be a secondary priority.

Judaism's core text, the Torah, does not have a lot to say on the subject. Some scholars interpret that silence as a response to

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the Egyptian glorification of the afterlife. Still, in Genesis 42:38, Jacob does refer to an underworld known as Sheol, and 1 Samuel 28:3-20 tells of the witch of Endor raising Samuel from the dead for Saul.

It is not until the Talmud and later mystical writings such as the Zohar that sources on the subject develop. Reading these demonstrates, says the bearded psychologist, that "from the 12th century onward, reincarnation is as kosher as Mogen David wine in Judaism."

Rabbi Menachem Schmidt, spiritual leader of Center City's Orthodox Vilna Congregation, agrees, noting: "Maimonides said resurrection of the dead [in the messianic age] is one of the 13 essential principles of Jewish belief." Rabbi Schmidt also asks, "If you have an eternal soul, then there has to be an afterlife because where is it going to go?"

Where? The "multitiered world of the afterlife" is Raphael's answer, based on a Hasidic story about Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk.

In the tale, the rabbi agrees to rear the child of a dying man in exchange for information about the afterlife. Raphael notes that the account the man's spirit gives the rabbi parallels much popular "near-death experience" literature of recent years.

The spirit begins its story by saying, "The moment of death was painless." It tells of watching the funeral, and of desires both to stay in the body and to depart it. Raphael says traditional Jewish literature calls such desires *hibbut ha-kever*, pangs of the grave. It is in this stage that a soul may meet "beings of light" or departed family members who may act as guides.

The spirit's family then enters *shiva*, the seven days of deepest mourning. Raphael says many people report a sense during this time that the soul of the departed is still with them. In fact, Raphael says, "Jewish tradition would suggest that in the immediate hours and days after a death, there is still a possibility for a sort of heart-to-heart, mind-to-mind, soul-to-soul conversation."

Traditionally, he says, mourners study Mishnah, a sacred text, because such study is believed to help the soul separate from physical existence. That belief arose because the Hebrew letters of Mishnah can be rearranged to spell *neschama*, the Hebrew word for soul.

The spirit's journey continues with a stop in a purgatory known as Gehenna. Raphael stresses, though, that "descriptions of heaven and hell in Jewish literature are not literal but are symbolic states of mind."

He tells his students that the Jewish underworld does not fit the Christian notion of eternal damnation as in a "hell with devils and pitchforks." Instead, it's a period of cleansing the soul through the reexamination of its life, more like "having to look at yourself in the mirror."

No soul spends more than 12 months being cleansed in Gehenna. So to avoid insulting the departed's memory, mourners do not say the Kaddish prayer for more than 11 months.

The spirit also tells the rabbi that all souls are released from Gehenna on the Sabbath. That idea accords with the belief that Sabbath observance is supposed to provide a foretaste of the *olam ha-ba*, or world to come, for all Jews living or dead.

At the end of the story, the spirit is looking forward to a final release from Gehenna and a permanent move into *Gan Eden*, the Garden of Eden. Raphael calls this "R&R of the soul, the equivalent of the soul going to Florida for the winter."

After that, he says, "ideally, the goal is to return to the source and stay there, to reunite with God." However, he notes, some Kabbalistic sources say things may not always work that way. "From the 12th century onwards, there developed the idea that some souls do not complete their spiritual journey and are not yet able to merge. Such souls need to reincarnate."

Through reincarnation, a soul might "come back and fulfill all of the *mitzvot*," the 613 commandments. "Others," says Raphael, "think that you might need to come back and develop different layers of the soul."

Discussing Raphael's scenario, a student remarks how closely the prescribed mourning stages parallel the grief process understood by modern psychology.

Actually, Raphael explains, "the language of the Zohar and the language of Judaism is far more mystical. What I am trying to do is strip away the medieval, flowery garb" and filter it "through my own training as a spiritual psychologist," he says.

As a psychologist, Raphael never loses sight of the fact that, despite the ethereal subject matter, his students are still very much in this world. He knows that people take his class "not only for intellectual reasons. Many are either acutely in grief or are trying to resolve some deeper issues and make some meaning of the loss."

Raphael's own studies and teaching started in his friend's memory because "just doing that gave meaning to death by putting back out into the world." So, he says, "if there is any value in these descriptions, they don't only refer to life after death but to life before death."

For more information on classes, workshops and counseling contact:

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