

**EXPLORING JEWISH VIEWS OF THE AFTERLIFE:
TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES**



Course Materials

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Exploring Jewish Views of the Afterlife: Traditional and Contemporary Perspectives

Course Materials

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EXPLORING JEWISH VIEWS OF THE AFTERLIFE: TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

An exploration of Jewish afterlife texts spanning three millennia of history. As travelers through time, we shall enter the worlds of Torah, Talmud, Midrash, Zohar and Hasidic tales investigating diverse ways Jews have understood the enigmatic mystery of death and the world beyond.

Searching for spiritual renewal of traditional teachings, we shall use these texts for reflection and discussion discovering practical guidelines for responding to the human encounter with death - personally, and in our families and communities.

Topics to be explored include:

SESSION I

Afterlife in Biblical and Rabbinic Tradition:

Jacob's Burial Cave, Samuel's Presence in Sheol

SESSION 2 -

Afterlife in Rabbinic Tradition:

Olam Haba and Visions of the Angel of Death

SESSION 3 -

Afterlife in Kabbalistic Tradition

Afterlife and the Soul's Journey in Zohar

Practical Applications for Working with the Dying and Bereaved

SESSION 4 -

Afterlife and the Renewal of Jewish Death Rituals

How Do Ideas of Afterlife Transform Contemporary Jewish Death Rituals?

Funeral and Burial as Soul-Guiding Rituals

Shiva and Kaddish as Soul-Guiding Rituals

Implications for Contemporary Jewish Communities

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AFTERLIFE IN BIBLICAL TRADITION: JACOB'S BURIAL CAVE AND SAMUEL'S PRESENCE IN SHEOL

1. AFTERLIFE IN MODERN JUDAISM

"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."

[Jean Herschaft, "Patient Should Not Be Told of Terminal Illness: Rabbi," *The Jewish Post and Opinion* (New York), 13 March 1981, p. 12.]

"...it is certainly true that Judaism gives us no details about what happens after death".

[Dennis Prager, "Life would be cruel if Judaism made no religious room for 'afterlife'" *Jewish Exponent*, October 22, 1989, p. 35ff.]

2. ANCESTRAL FAMILY TOMB – DEATH OF JACOB

Then [Jacob] gave them these instructions: "I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite, along with the field. There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried, and there I buried Leah. The field and the cave in it were bought from the Hittites." "When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people. (Gen 29:28-33)

3. SPIRITISM/EISHET Ba'ALAT OB - KING SAUL & WITCH OF EN-DOR

Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in his own town of Ramah. Saul had expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land. The Philistines assembled and came and set up camp at Shunem, while Saul gathered all the Israelites and set up camp at Gilboa. When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. He inquired of Y*H*V*H, but Y*H*V*H did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets.

Saul then said to his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium*, so I may go and inquire of her." "There is one in Endor," they said. So Saul disguised himself, putting on other clothes, and at night he and two men went to the woman. "Consult a spirit for me," he said, "and bring up for me the one I name." But the woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done. He has cut off the mediums and spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?" Saul swore to her by Y*H*V*H, "As surely as Y*H*V*H lives, you will not be punished for this."

Then the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" "Bring up Samuel," he said. When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!" The king said to her, "Don't be afraid. What do you see?" The woman said, "I see a spirit coming up out of the ground." "What does he look like?" he asked. "An old man wearing a robe is coming up," she said. Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself... face to the ground.

Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" "I am in great distress," Saul said. "The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do." (I Sam. 28:3-15)

REACTIONS TO SPIRITISM/CONDEMNATION OF CONTACT WITH DEAD

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 [*sheol ov*] or spiritist [*v'yidoni*] or who consults the dead [*doresh el hamatim*]. (Deut. 18:10-11)

[Furthermore, Josiah got rid of] the necromancers [*ha'ovot*] and the mediums [*ha'yidanim*], the household gods [*teraphim*], and the fetishes - all the detestable things that were to be seen in the land of Judah and Jerusalem. (2 Kings 23:24)

The high priest, the one among his brothers who has had the anointing oil poured on his head and who has been ordained to wear the priestly garments... must not enter a place where there is a dead body. He must not make himself unclean, even for his father or mother... because he has been dedicated by the anointing oil of his God. I am Y*H*V*H. (Leviticus 21:10 -12)

I have not eaten of it [consecrated food] in my mourning, neither have I consumed any part of it when unclean, nor given of it for the dead, but have harkened to the voice of Y*H*V*H my God. (Deut. 26:14)

4. CHANGING IMAGES OF SHEOL

i) SHEOL - AN A-MORAL UNDERWORLD REALM

Says Jacob - "If any harm came to him [Benjamin] on the journey you are to undertake, you would send me down to Sheol with my white head bowed in grief" (Gen. 42:38).

ii) SHEOL - A DARK SUBTERRANEAN REALM

"Your magnificence has been flung down to Sheol... underneath a bed of maggots and over you a blanket of worms" (Isa. 14:11).

iii) SHEOL - A REALM OF SILENCE (GOD'S POWER EXTENDS TO SHEOL)

The living know they shall die: but the dead know nothing, nor do they have any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. (Ecc. 9:5).

iv) SHEOL - A REALM IN WHICH GOD'S POWER CAN OPERATE

But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, and will receive me. (Psalm 49:15)

5. COLLECTIVE ESCHATOLOGY AS PREDOMINANT MOTIF IN BIBLE

Visions of a Future Era of Socio-Political Redemption (8th cent. BCE):

Behold the days are coming, says Y*H*V*H, when the ploughman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt..and they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine; they shall also make gardens and eat the fruit of them. (Amos 9:13-14).

A Universal Vision of Redemption (6th cent. BCE):

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of Y*H*V*H's house shall be established on top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all the nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of Y*H*V*H, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of His ways so that we may walk in His paths; for out of Zion shall go for Torah and the word of Y*H*V*H from Jerusalem'. (Isa. 2:2-3)

6. RESURRECTION

National Resurrection in Ezekiel (6th century B.C.E)

The hand of Y*H*V*H was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of Y*H*V*H, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, and he caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry. And he said to me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord Y*H*V*H, thou knowst. Again he said to me, Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of Y*H*V*H. Thus says the Lord Y*H*V*H to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live: and I will lay sinews upon you, and I will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am Y*H*V*H. So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone... So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up on their feet, an exceeding great army. (Ezek. 37:1-8; 10)

Then he said to me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are clean cut off. Therefore prophesy and say to them, Thus says the Lord Y*H*V*H; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am Y*H*V*H, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and have brought you up out of your graves (Ezek. 37:11-13).

Resurrection in Isaiah (4th cent. BCE)

The dead men of thy people shall live, my dead body shall arise. Awake and sing, you that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew on herbs and earth shall cast out the shades of the dead. (Is. 26:19)

Resurrection in Daniel (2nd cent. BCE)

There shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation till that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one who shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Dan. 12:1-2)

AFTERLIFE IN RABBINIC TRADITION: OLAM HABA AND VISIONS OF THE ANGEL OF DEATH

I. VARYING CONCEPTIONS OF OLAM HABA/THE WORLD TO COME

OLAM HABA - THE RABBINIC PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE AND DEATH

Rabbi Jacob said: This world [**Olam HaZeh**] is like a vestibule before the World to Come [**Olam HaBa**]. Prepare yourself in the vestibule that you may enter into the banquet hall. And further, he used to say : “**Better is one hour of repentance and good works in This World [Olam HaZeh] than the whole life of the World to Come [Olam HaBa]. Better is one hour of bliss in the World to Come than the whole of life in this world.**” (Mishna Avot 4: 16-17)

He who accepts the pleasures of this world [**Olam HaZeh**] is deprived of the pleasures of the World to Come [**Olam HaBa**] (ARN 28, 43a).

When King David died, Solomon, his son sent this inquiry to the *Bet Ha-Midrash*: 'My father is dead and lying in the sun; and the dogs of my father's house are hungry, what shall I do? They sent back this answer: “Feed the dogs first and then attend to your dead father... **living dogs take precedence over a dead king.**” (Shab. 30b)

Olam Haba - Post-Mortem Or Messianic?

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).

My Torah 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 awake, it will converse with you in the Olam Haba. (Sifre on Lev. 18:4)

The story is told that **when Rabbi Abahu was about to depart from this life, he beheld all the good things that were stored up for him in Olam Haba, and he rejoiced (Ex. R. 52:3).**

There is none to be compared beside You, O Lord our God, **in this world**, neither is there any beside You, O Lord our King, for **the life of the World to Come** [*Ha-Olam Haba*]; there is none but You, O our Redeemer, for the **days of the Messiah** [*Yemot Ha-Mashiakh*]; neither is there any like unto You, O our Savior, for the **resurrection of the dead** [*Tekhiyat Ha-Metim*]. (from Shabbat morning liturgy)

2. GEHENNA

There are seven names for Gehenna: **Sheol** [Jonah 2:2]; **Abbadon**, or Destruction [Ps. 88:12]; **Be'er Shakhat**, or Corruption [Ps. 16:10]; **Bor Sha'on**, or Horrible Pit and **Tit Ha'Yaven**, or Miry Clay [Ps. 40:3], **Tzalmavet**, or Shadow of Death [Ps. 107:10], and **Eretz Ha-Takhtit**, the Nether World, which is a tradition [Moses receive at Mount Sinai] (Erub. 19a). ...there are seven storeys for the wicked in Gehinnom, their names being: **Sheol**, **Abbadon** [Destruction], **Tzalmavet** [Shadow of Death], **Eretz Takhtit** [Nether World], **Eretz Neshiyah** [Realm of Forgetfulness], **Gehinnom**, and **Dumah** [Silence] (Midr. Ps. 11:6).

Gehenna And The Rabbinic Worldview

Rabbi Eliezer asked Rabbi Joshua: "What should a man do **to escape the judgement of Gehenna?**" He replied: "Let him **occupy himself with good deeds**" (**Midr. Prov. 17:1, 42b**)

...one who visits the sick (Ned. 40a), or observes [the practice of] three meals on the Shabbat is saved from the retribution of Gehenna (Shabbat 118a); If in reciting the *Shema*, one pronounces the letters distinctly, Gehenna is cooled for him (**Ber. 15a**).

...he who has Torah, good deeds, humility and fear of heaven will be saved from punishment [in Gehenna] (**Pesikta Rabbati 50.1**); ... people who study Torah will be released from torments of Gehenna (**Midrash Prov. 1:5; 2:21**).

Characteristics And Qualities Of Gehenna

Gehenna is half **fire** and half **hail** (**Ex. R. 51:7**).

DURATION OF PUNISHMENT IN Gehenna

heretics, informers, scoffers [*epikorsim*], and those who have rejected the words of Torah and denied the belief in the resurrection are sentenced to Gehenna "**for all generations**" (**RH 17a**).

3. RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

There is **no section of the Torah which does not imply the doctrine of Resurrection**, but we have not the capacity to expound it in this sense (**Sifre Deut. 306; 132a**).

Those who die outside the land of Israel will not live again... and those who die in the land of My delight will live again, but those who do not die there will not... Even a Canaanite maidservant in the **land of Israel is assured of inheriting the World to Come** (**Keth. 111b**).

The Holy Blessed One will burrow the earth before them and their bodies will roll through the excavation like bottles, and when they arrive at the land of Israel their soul will be reunited to them. (**P. Keth. 35b**)

4. OTZAR – DIVINE TREASURY

...souls of the righteous and of the wicked alike ascend above, but those of the righteous are placed in the divine treasury [*otzar*], while those of the wicked are cast about on earth. (**Ecc. R. 3:18**).

souls of the righteous are in safekeeping under the Throne of Glory", as it is said: "Your life shall be bound up in the bond of life [*tzror ha-hayyim*] with the Lord your God"(1 Sam. 25:29)" (**ARN 12**).

5. PHENOMENA OF AFTER-DEATH JOURNEY - MOMENT OF DEATH & BEYOND

As they are about to depart from this world, the righteous are shown the reward rightfully due to them, and they rejoice in such sublime vision (**Ex. R. 52:3**).

When a man departs to his eternal home all his deeds are enumerated before him and he is told: "Such and such a thing have you done, in such and such a place on that day." Admitting to the justice of the verdict the individual then signs the record shown to him saying, "Rightly have You judged me" (**Taan. 11a**).

Angels are assigned to every human being. And every day they record his deeds, so that everything he does is known to the Holy Blessed One, and everything is put down on his record and marked with a seal... Accordingly, when a righteous man arrives at the end of his days, his recording angels precede him into heaven singing his praise... But when a wicked man dies, a man who did not bring himself to turn in repentance to God, the Holy Blessed One, says to him: "Let your soul be blasted in despair! How many times did I call upon you to repent, and you did not." **(Pesikta Rabbati, 44:8)**

6. DIVINATION PRACTICES & THE AFTERLIFE IN JEWISH FOLK RELIGION

i) "incantations" at the grave... **ii)** spending night on the grave, clothed in a distinctive garment and burning spices & incense while waving a myrtle wand... **iii)** A man and a woman station themselves at the head and foot of a grave, and on the earth between they set a rattle, which they strike while they recite a secret invocation... (quoted by Trachtenberg, p. 224.) An acceptable practice it invokes the dead by means of angelic names: "Stand before the grave and recite the names of the angels of the fifth camp of the first firmament, and hold in your hand a mixture of oil and honey in a new glass bowl, and say, 'I conjure you, spirit of the grave...' [the text then goes on to delineate the invocation to the spirit] ..." **(Trachtenberg, p. 224).**

THE SPIRIT WORLD

...a man who fell asleep in a synagogue and was locked in by the sexton [and] awoke to find himself in the midst of... a spirit congregation; to his amazement he discerned the forms of two men who were still among the living. Sure enough, within a few days these two passed away. **(Trachtenberg, p. 62).**

R. Benjamin b. Zerah on his deathbed, promised to warn members of his congregation if any disaster impended. A short while after his demise he appeared in the synagogue & divulged that at the instant of death he had seen a heavenly decree inflicting a persecution upon them. **(Trachtenberg, p. 223).**

INCANTATION TO BANISH SPIRITS

With consent of the celestial and earthly tribunals I conjure you in the name of God of heaven and of earth, and by all the holy Names, that you desist from pursuing any human, whether man or woman, adult or child, near or far, and that you do them no harm with your body or your spirit or your soul. Your body must lie in its grave until resurrection, your soul must rest in that place where it belongs. I command this upon you with an oath, now and forever. **(Quoted by Trachtenberg, p. 66).**