

Peering Beyond Life

More than 100 people turn out for Kol Emeth's lecture on Judaism and the afterlife.

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Simcha Raphael clearly remembers a cold winter day in 1973.

"My life was changed forever as I stood witness while the body of a beloved friend, a young man of 22, was lowered into the frozen earth," he has written. "With an aching, numb heart I found myself wondering, as people often do, what happened to the life force once animating this body?"

And so began his journey, one that resulted in the book *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, published by Jason Aronson, Inc.

Dr. Raphael, assistant professor of religion and Jewish Chaplain at La Salle University in Philadelphia, told more than 100 people earlier this month at Temple Kol Emeth about the paral-

els between the stages of the afterlife journey of the soul and Jewish grief rituals.

He linked the initial seven-day mourning period, or *shiva*, with the soul's experiencing restless "pangs from the grave" when it is still coming to terms with its death.

After *shiva*, he said, loved ones let the soul go. Since they have been confined to the house for a week, sometimes this is done by walking around the block, which designates a new beginning.

In a similar fashion, Dr. Raphael connected the 11 to 12 month period Jews spend saying the mourner's kaddish, or prayer for the dead, to the same period a soul spends in Gehenna, the Hebrew name for purgatory. There, tradition says the soul becomes purified before entering the

Garden of Eden, an analogy for heaven.

By saying kaddish, the survivors can help free a soul from Gehenna, he explained.

"I found it very helpful," said Marietta resident Deena Youngwirth. "Only because I think for most people, we do not have really consistent thoughts about an afterlife. I lost my brother this year so it's something I think about now... There is a belief system out there and some people have been denied it completely."

Dr. Raphael noted how secularization of religion, psychoanalysis — which did not hold a very favorable view of religion — and the Holocaust further hindered such thinking.

"All of those variables together kind of made for a distancing

of these traditional Jewish ideas about life after death," he said.

Dr. Raphael also discussed "ancestral guides," or beings of light who are there for you when you die. Many people have reported dreams of family members appearing, he said. He even explored the concept that one's life will "flash before one's eyes" at the moment of death.

"He laid out a very palatable explanation for things according to Judaism," said Marge Krengel, of Marietta. "Other religions like Christianity have a pretty pat answer and there is no question about if you are going to heaven."

Stephanie Winkler of Marietta said that Dr. Raphael's sense of humor reminded her of Woody Allen. But jokes aside, she added that "a lot of people really do need to examine the afterlife, which will then influence their lives on earth." □

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