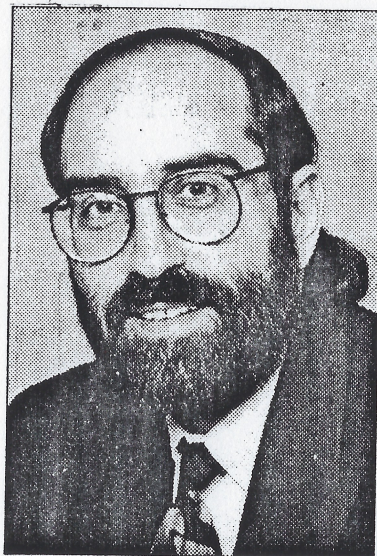


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RABBI SIMCHA PAULL RAPHAEL

## Rabbi's book gives new slant on afterlife

BY A. ENGLER ANDERSON  
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*"[I]n the same way as the soul has to be clothed in a bodily garment to exist in this world, so is she given an ethereal supernal garment wherewith to exist in the other world, and to be enabled to gaze at the effulgence of life radiating from that land of the living."*

Zohar, Noah, 66a

Simcha Paull Raphael says many Jews want something different.

That's why he wrote his first book, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, published this month by the New Jersey-based Judaica house, Jason Aronson.

"We're looking for a non-rationalist explanation of Judaism that has to

do with direct encounter with God, the invisible world, higher consciousness," Raphael said in a recent interview.

"All those non-rationalist elements were weeded out by the 19th-century Enlightenment and in the first half of the 20th century," said Raphael, a Jewish chaplain at La Salle University who was ordained as a rabbinic pastor by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi in 1990.

### Non-rationalistic world

The non-rationalistic world Raphael writes about is the afterlife as conceived by rabbis, from biblical figures through the Talmud; medieval thinkers; Kabbalists; and Chasidic masters.

Raphael, who is heavily influenced by Schachter-Shalomi's Jewish Renewal teachings, blends the Kabbalah with psychology — in which he holds a doctorate — to derive a new paradigm of death, dying and the afterlife.

Though he surveys the classical Jewish sources, he departs with a new model that takes into account near-death experiences, Tibetan Buddhism and transpersonal psychology. There's

even a footnote citing the "est" sect.

Raphael sees the dead and the living as existing on different planes of being, not as mere states of on and off, being and nothingness. He allows for contact between the living and the dead by positing Jewish bereavement rituals as means of connecting.

His "Kabbalistic-Psychological Model of Afterlife" sees existence divided into the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical realms, each accompanied by a specific ritual.

### Helping the soul depart

In the Raphaelian scheme, confession, burial preparations, funeral and *shiva* help the soul depart from the physical body. In the emotional realm, the saying of Kaddish repre-

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sents emotional purgation (Gehenna).

In the mental realm, the soul ascends to bliss through the *yahrzeit* observance, rising from the lower to upper Garden of Eden. Finally, through *Yizkor*, the soul reaches its highest state in entering into the "treasury of souls," the *tsror ha-hayim* (bundle of souls) of rabbinic literature, and being reborn through *gilgul* (transmigration, reincarnation).

That's the explanation, Raphael said, for the Yiddish expression, "*De neshamah zol hoben an aliyah*" (May the soul experience a spiritual ascent).

"It's about mediating an ongoing connection" between living and dead, he explained, pointing to a model where the aim of life is mystical union with the divine.

"Reb Zalman [Schachter-Shalomi] used to teach that Meister Eckhardt [a Christian mystic] taught, 'The eye with which I see God and the eye with which he sees me are the same eye,'" Raphael recalled.

Each of Raphael's after-death stages corresponds to a phase in the grieving process and specific goals for deathbed work by pastoral counselors, an area of interest for Raphael, who once worked as a counselor at a progressive funeral home in Montreal.

But Raphael said his philosophy isn't for everybody.

"I'm not selling this," he said. "Many are comfortable to say, 'life is for the living; death is for the dead.'"

"Many people who read the Exponent grew up with a kind of secular, rationalistic Judaism, in a generation where soul and afterlife weren't discussed. But some people want the deeper picture."

The universal corollary of the afterlife, eschatology and the messianic end of time is downplayed in Raphael's book in favor of individual experience — much as the 18th-century Chasidic masters were reported to have downplayed national redemption in favor of personal, spiritual redemption.

### Another strand

"There's this whole other strand that I'm trying to bring out — not what happens to *am Yisrael* at the end of time, but what happens to Joe and Jane Jew after they die," Raphael said. "It's more from the Kabbalah than from medieval philosophy."

Raphael moved to Philadelphia from Jerusalem in 1989, but had worked here earlier as executive director for Schachter-Shalomi's religious fellowship, now called P'nai Or. He was also active in the San Francisco Aquarian Minyan, a project of Schachter-Shalomi and the late Shlomo Carlebach.

Born in Montreal, Raphael had a traditional *heder* (Jewish one-room schoolhouse) education where he studied the Pentateuch, with the commentary of Rabbi Solomon ben Issac (Rashi), at the age of 8.

He is married to Geela Rayzel Raphael, a Reconstructionist rabbinical student and feminist activist. He and his wife created the surname Raphael by taking her maiden name (Robinson) and his name (Paull), and adding the Hebrew letter *lamèd*, spelling Raphael in Hebrew.

"A hyphenated name like Robinson-Paull would sound too much like a funeral director in Penn Valley," he explained. ■