

Jewish Life

Jews and the afterlife



Books

By Bernard Baskin

Jewish Views Of The Afterlife
by Simcha Paull Raphael
Jason-Aaronson

The author of this informative volume relates the following incident. A rabbi lecturing to a group of nurses was asked, "Does Judaism believe in an afterlife?" He replied, "Judaism celebrates life and the living. It dwells on life here rather than on the hereafter as other faiths do. Life is precious, the here and the now."

This customary response disturbs Raphael. He asserts, "It is simply not true." *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* demonstrates his contention that Jews have always believed in the "next world" and that there exists an extensive legacy of Jewish writings and teachings on the subject.

The author skillfully guides the reader through beliefs and views on the afterlife that are found in the Bible, rabbinic literature, Kabbalah, and Chassidism. Especially noteworthy is his presentation of little-known texts from medieval Midrash, some of which were discovered in the 19th century in the famous Cairo Geniza. Some of this material is as lurid and grotesque as anything found in Dante's *Inferno*.

The Torah contains very few references to the afterlife, other

than to a shadowy realm of disembodied spirits called *Sheol*. Unique is the sentiment in the Book of Daniel: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame."

In the centuries following the Babylonian Exile (586 to 536 BCE), Persian and Greek influences stimulated Jewish thinking in new directions. Apocryphal literature written during the period (200 BCE to 200 CE) contained elaborate descriptions of *Gehenna* and Paradise, as well as the doctrines of individual immortality, divine judgement and the resurrection of the dead.

Rabbinic teachings about the afterlife are numerous, but they are ambiguous and contradictory. The Ethics of the Fathers, a portion of the Mishnah, teaches that this world is like a vestibule before the world to come: "Prepare yourself in the vestibule so that you may enter into the hall of a palace." Yet there is the opposing teaching from the same text: "Better is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than a whole life of the world to come."

The sage Rav (third century CE) conjured up this vision of the hereafter: "There is no eating, nor drinking, nor propagation, nor business, nor jealousy, nor hatred, nor competition, but the righteous sit with crowns on their heads feasting on the brightness of the *Shechinah*." Yet this sage who presents so spiritual a view also teaches that in the world to come a person will be obliged to give an account of every legitimate pleasure he denied himself in this world.

Understandably, medieval Jew-

ish philosophers held diverse opinions on this complex subject. The author lucidly summarizes the views of Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, Gersonides and Nachmanides.

Chapters on the Kabbalah and chassidic tales offer provocative insights into such concepts as the levels of the soul, reincarnation and an understanding of illness and the dying process.

What will surprise most readers is the author's contention that the actions of the living can influence the dead, that between the living and world of the dead there is a window and not a wall. "Jewish tradition suggests that the living can functionally influence the fate of the soul in the realms of the afterlife. Perhaps through the processes of burial, shivah, Kaddish, *yahrzeit* and Yizkor bereaved friends and family, and appropriate 'soul guiding' professionals, can consciously attune to the inner worlds and help the disembodied soul to progress through the various phases of the postmortem journey."

The author, a bereavement psychologist, influenced by recent developments in trans-personal psychology and consciousness research, insists that we need to reach rabbis, educators, helping professionals and others about Judaism's afterlife teachings as well as recent psychological perspectives on dying and bereavement.

This scholarly work — 15 years in the making — is also a deeply felt personal statement that merits a wide readership. It seeks to bring Jews back to necessary teachings about life and death that have been largely forgotten or neglected.