

# Reworking Jewish tradition

*Rabbi seeks to resurrect ancient belief in the afterlife journey of the soul*

Many Jews pride themselves on a tradition they regard as rational, practical and this-worldly in comparison with the mysticism and other-worldliness of some other approaches.

But, like the writer who will be the main subject of this column, I suspect this is beginning to change.

There seems to me to be something of a reawakening of interest in the aspects of Judaism that could be described as more religious or spiritual, even mystical.

One expatriate Montrealer, with family still here, has been reworking Jewish tradition in ways that are both spiritual and informed by some of the insights of modern psychology.

Rabbi Simcha Paull Raphael was educated in Hebrew day schools and the United Talmud Torahs, holds two degrees from Concordia University and taught at three Montreal CEGEPs.

He's now a psychotherapist specializing in treating bereavement, assistant professor of religion and the Jewish chaplain at Philadelphia's largely Catholic La Salle University.

He is the son of Rose and Harold Paull of Montreal and Florida. One of his brothers runs the family business, Marksted Agencies' Travel Consultants, on Queen Mary Rd. The rabbi on occasion acts as a tour leader.

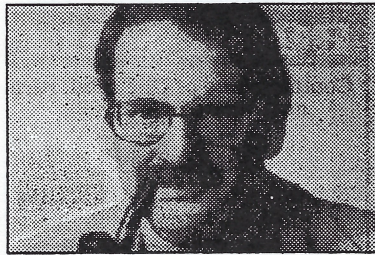
## Spirituality and social change

Raphael, now in his early 40s, was ordained by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, of a movement known as Jewish Renewal, a range of groups that promote spirituality and social change.

He is married to Geela Rayzel Robinson Raphael, a rabbi in the Reconstructionist movement.

The Raphael surname was created by the two of them out of their two original surnames and the Hebrew letter lamed; it sounded better to them than Robinson-Paull. They have a son, Yigdal.

Simcha Paull Raphael's 475-page book, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, came out late last year. It's published by Jason Aronson Inc. of



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Northvale, N.J., which lists it at \$20 U.S.. Rodal's Hebrew Book Store and Gift Shop on Van Horne Ave. told me recently that they didn't have it in stock but would be glad to order it.

*Jewish Views of the Afterlife* includes a remarkable compendium of lore.

There's discussion of, or translated extracts from, Jewish sources down through the centuries: the Jewish Bible and the post-biblical work called the Apocrypha, the teachings of the early rabbis, the medieval commentary known as midrash, the medieval philosopher Saadia Gaon, Moses Maimonides and Levi ben Gershom (or Gersonides), the mystical tradition known as the Kabbalah and the Hasidic tradition, with its origins in the 18th century.

Along with all this, there are personal reflections by Simcha Paull Raphael and a concluding chapter in which he attempts to synthesize some of this lore with teachings and concepts drawn from Tibetan Buddhism, recent research into near-death experiences and the spiritually oriented school of psychology called transpersonal psychology, associated with writers like Abraham Maslow, Stanislaw Grof and Ken Wilber.

Raphael suggests the book be read "randomly, associatively, allowing the imagistic material to act upon the higher mind, the intuition, the soul." This seems good advice.

Raphael writes that he has been confronted with death often. A grandmother died when he was 4, and in his early 20s, two close

friends died, one of a brain hemorrhage and the other in a car accident. He later helped set up and run a bereavement-support program established by a Jewish undertaker in Toronto.

The Jewish tradition as it was handed on to him provided relatively little support in confronting death.

All too typical, in Raphael's view, is the comment of a rabbi he recently heard lecture on biomedical ethics.

"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."

For Raphael, this is "the singularly most problematic Jewish belief about life after death today. Why? Because it is simply not true!"

There is a great deal of truth in the statement, he concedes; Judaism "does value life, here and now, over and above a future death and eternal life."

But it is also true that, over the course of 4,000 years, "Judaism evolved and promulgated a multifaceted philosophy of postmortem survival, with doctrines comparable to those found in the great religions of the world."

## Always believed

"In short," he writes, "Jews have always believed in life after death."

In his view, there are sound reasons for the relative neglect by modern Jews of their afterlife traditions, related, among other things, to the emphasis in Judaism on reason and the group rather than the individual, to the persecution of Jews by Christians with their afterlife preoccupations, and to the massive impact of the Holocaust.

"In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the memory of the six million (Jews killed) was best honored by affirming the continuity of Jewish existence, not by focusing on the postmortem fate of the dead."

But times are changing, the neglect of Jewish after-death tradition is having unfortunate effects and the time has come for Jews to start reintegrating it, Raphael argues.

"Fifty years after Auschwitz it is time to resurrect the ancient Jewish tradition of the afterlife journey of the soul and to make those teachings available in a language and style appropriate for contemporary Jewish life, in the metaphor of the psychology of consciousness."

The Tibetan Book of the Dead may well be sufficient for Tibetan monks. But now there is a need to develop a Jewish Book of the Dead, or more appropriately, a Jewish Book of Life, that will be a manual for dying Bubbys and Zaidyes (Jewish grandmas and grandpas) and their children and grandchildren.

I could not begin to summarize, much less evaluate, the hundreds of pages in which Raphael attempts to make his contribution to this task. But it is fascinating material.

So are his efforts to synthesize the multi-layered afterworlds of the Bible and other traditional lore, the multi-layered model of human existence derived from Kabbalistic tradition, the stages of after-death migration described in the Tibetan Book of the Dead and some modern psychological thought.

Raphael's Kabbalistic-psychological model suggests to him at least, "that beyond the limitations of the physical form, there exists a timeless, immortal dimension of the individual personality, a soul, a consciousness, that survives bodily death. . . . Individual awareness transcends physical death, and death itself is simply a transition to another state of consciousness. This being the case, death is not to be feared."

"In the final analysis," Raphael writes, "our Kabbalistic-psychological model teaches us that between the world of the living and the world of the dead there is a window and not a wall."