

on the afterlife. The spirit of the times of the fifties, sixties, and seventies necessitated building a socially responsive and intellectually viable Judaism. Within the context of a post–World War II North American Judaism, there has not been any room for a concern with spirituality and disembodied souls in the hereafter. It may well be that for many Jews, raised in the shadow of the Holocaust, there was simply no need for a philosophy of the afterlife.

However, over the past quarter-century there has been a progressive yearning for spirituality and spiritual renewal. As the twenty-first century unfolds, we find ourselves in a critical time of societal transformation and a revolution in human consciousness. Perhaps now, more than seventy years after the Holocaust, it is time to rediscover the Jewish spiritual legacy that was buried in the ashes of Auschwitz. In this era, as a more evolved and accepting approach to death, dying, and bereavement is being developed in Western culture, the time is ripe for bringing to light the full legacy of Jewish teachings on death and the afterlife.

## CULTURAL CONTEXT

To define the parameters of this book, we need to explore two important contemporary cultural trends that are background to our investigation of life after death in Judaism: (1) the Jewish renewal movement and (2) thanatology, the interdisciplinary study of death and dying.

The first, the Jewish renewal movement, is best described as a contemporary concern with the renaissance of spirituality in the Jewish community. The second trend, thanatology, is a discipline of study in and of itself, and as a social movement it can be regarded as the growing societal interest in all dimensions of death, dying, and bereavement. Written at the crossroads of these two trailblazing movements, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* is both a contribution to and a product of Jewish renewal and contemporary thanatology.

### The Jewish Renewal Movement

Behind the writing of this book is the influence of a new spirit that has been growing within contemporary Judaism for more than three decades, known as the Jewish renewal movement. Jewish renewal is a socially progressive and environmentally conscious movement of individuals and communities, dedicated to the creative revitalization of all facets of Jewish spiritual life. Using spiritual tools and traditions of Judaism, and open to wisdom of other traditions as well as state-of-the-art contemporary psychological and spiritual trends, the Jewish renewal movement is dedicated to the transformation of individuals, families, communities, culture, and ultimately life on this planet in a global age.

The Jewish renewal movement has become a viable denomination in the North American Jewish community and can be seen as both a religious and a social force.

As a religious force, Jewish renewal is creating a new theological understanding of the meaning and role of religion in a person's life. Drawing from mystical teachings of Kabbalah, a dualistic, human-divine understanding is being replaced by an imminent theology that recognizes the inherent unity of the individual, the divine, and the environment. As a social force, Jewish renewal is creating new participatory forms of worship and celebration, new liturgy and ritual practices, and is evolving an egalitarian, feminist Judaism in which women are participating in and serving as spiritual leaders in Jewish life as never before.

Jewish renewal is an outgrowth of the contemporary search for spiritual meaning characteristic of this time in history, articulating a vision of Judaism in the twenty-first century that combines ancient wisdom of the past and the emerging paradigm of the postmodern age.

The history of the Jewish renewal movement dates back to the 1960s, during the era of antiwar protest, psychedelic drugs, and hippies. As a response to religious alienation within the synagogues and the bureaucratic, hierarchical organization of Jewish community life, a Jewish counterculture coalesced. In places like New York and Boston young people who had rejected the structures of the community envisioned creating radically new forms of Jewish expression. In study, prayer, and ritual celebration, the writings of individuals like Henry David Thoreau, Martin Luther King Jr., and Abbie Hoffman were fused with ancient teachings from the Hebrew prophets and the Psalms. Reflecting the radical social consciousness of the times, this countercultural movement planted the seeds of a unique American contribution to Jewish culture. Most noteworthy, during this era an important publication was conceived: *The Jewish Catalog*, a do-it-yourself manual for Jewish practice and a source of inspiration to people searching for practical guidelines to the renewal of Judaism.<sup>36</sup>

During the 1970s this revitalizing force in the Jewish world was referred to "New Age Judaism." At that time, Eastern religions and the human potential movement had become very popular, attracting many Jewish adherents. Influenced largely by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and the communities he founded, such as the Aquarian Minyan of Berkeley and the P'nai Or Religious Fellowship, an innovative form of Judaism emerged that blended mystical Jewish traditions with Yoga, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Sufism, and other esoteric philosophies along with the consciousness practices of humanistic and transpersonal psychology. Many who had studied with Eastern gurus and lamas returned to the Jewish fold, practicing a renewed style of Judaism that emphasized meditation, spirituality, and the pursuit of expanded consciousness over and above rationality and rote ritual.

Moving from the fringes to the frontier of Jewish life, New Age Judaism became a strong force for the rediscovery and resurrection of the mystical, spiritual side of Judaism. Inspired by the new forms of spirituality pioneered in this period, many were challenged to learn more about the Jewish past and to bring to light treasured ancient resources of Jewish mysticism and spirituality. This process of reclaiming the spiritual legacy of the past has continued through the years, affecting Jewish learning, liturgy, and practice.

During the late 1960s and into the 1970s an entirely new phenomenon in American Jewish life appeared on the scene, the *Havurah*. Derived from the Hebrew *haver*, or “friend,” *Havurah* literally means “fellowship” or “friendship circle.” *Havurot* are small communities of men and women who gather on a regular basis for prayer, Torah study, and the celebration of Shabbat, holy days, and life-cycle rituals. In contrast to the styles of mainstream congregations, *Havurot* tend to be empowering rather than alienating. They are usually peer-led and emphasize creative experimentation in liturgy and a “do-it-yourself,” participatory form of Jewish practice.

Although originally an outgrowth of the early countercultural movement, today there are both independent *Havurot* and those operating in conjunction with existing synagogues, and a national organization networking *Havurah* communities in the United States and elsewhere. The *Havurah* movement as a whole may be regarded as an early forerunner of the Jewish renewal movement.

It was in the early 1980s, under the inspiration of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi—the founder of Jewish renewal—that the term “Jewish renewal” was first coined to describe the growing international movement that was spawning a spiritual renaissance within Jewish life. Over the subsequent decades more and more Jewish renewal communities emerged, and Reb Zalman (as he was called by students and peers) began a formal process of ordaining Jewish renewal rabbis. In this period of organization-building, this eventually led to the creation of Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, and Ohalah, a professional association of Jewish renewal clergy. Today there are more than two hundred ordained Jewish renewal rabbis, and Jewish renewal congregations and *havurot* in more than one hundred locations in the United States, Canada, Israel, Europe, Australia, and South America.

Interwoven with the evolution of Jewish renewal, there has been a burgeoning interest in the mystical, mythical, and apocalyptic traditions of Judaism. As Jewish renewal leaders and contemporary teachers of Jewish spirituality and mysticism have demonstrated, there is so much more to Judaism than meets the eye, so much that has been covered over by rationalism, secularization, and cultural assimilation. Through the process of Jewish renewal, scholars and practitioners alike are being motivated to unearth the sacred past. Since the closing decades of the twentieth century, more and more traditional Jewish texts have been translated into English, and this process is continuing. In addition, a number of leading Jewish teachers are creating a new genre of American Jewish spiritual writings. Topics such as mysticism, meditation, magic, folk religion, healing, and altered states of consciousness, as well as reincarnation and life after death, are emerging on the agenda of study not only in small study circles but also in well-respected academies of Jewish learning. Greater and greater numbers of Jews and non-Jews are becoming passionately interested in the long-lost legacy of Jewish spirituality and mysticism.

It is in this spirit that this book is being written. The spiritual search inherent to Jewish renewal has provided the impetus to ask the following questions: What is the ancient legacy of Jewish teachings on the afterlife? And how can this heritage be made accessible and relevant to the contemporary world?

This book contributes to the work of Jewish renewal in three distinct ways. First, as a survey of Jewish teachings on life after death through the ages, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* makes a substantial addition to the growing body of knowledge of Jewish spirituality and mysticism. In particular, little-known kabbalistic and midrashic teachings on the soul and its postmortem destiny are mapped out here, designed to be accessible to all.

Second, this book presents a contemporary contribution to current Jewish thought. In the spirit of Jewish renewal, a contemporary model of the afterlife is developed, based on the recent developments in transpersonal psychology and consciousness research. This model synthesizes the ancient past with the most innovative cultural trends and in so doing attempts to facilitate the process of bringing Judaism and Jewish thought into the future.

Finally, Jewish renewal is interested in renewing traditional rituals to give them a sense of meaning and in evolving new forms of practice that honor the individual need for spiritual fulfillment and understanding. The spiritually oriented view of the afterlife presented in the final chapter recognizes that consciousness survives bodily death. This point of view has implications in how we understand and practice the rituals associated with dying and grieving. Awareness that a spiritual connection between the living and the deceased persists even after death of the body can totally transform the ways in which we look at every facet of the human encounter with death. The spiritual view of the afterlife developed in this book has the potential to reinvigorate and bring new meaning to all the traditional Jewish ritual practices of death and mourning, from dying and the deathbed to burial, funeral, and the various bereavement rituals of shivah, Kaddish, Yahrzeit, and Yizkor. In the long run, reclaiming the ancient Jewish tradition of the afterlife and making it relevant to our times will totally revolutionize the way Jewish communities care for the elderly, sick, dying, and bereaved.

### **Thanatology: The Interdisciplinary Study of Death and Dying**

A second and equally important influence in the writing of this book has been widespread transformation in attitudes toward death and dying in the culture as a whole. Over the past fifty years, death, once a taboo subject spoken of in hushed tones, has now come out of the closet. There has been an unparalleled growth and proliferation of the interdisciplinary field of inquiry known as thanatology, the study of death and dying. Its name is derived from Thanatos, the mythological Greek god of death, who was a twin of Hypnos, the god of sleep. Thanatology is an amalgam of research, academic study, professional training, and innovative ways of providing services for all aspects of death, dying, bereavement, burial, and issues related to near-death experiences and postmortem survival. History, philosophy, religion, anthropology, sociology, parapsychology, and consciousness research, as well the helping professions of psychiatry, psychology, social work, ministry, nursing, and medicine, intermingle in the quest to understand the multidimensional experience of death and respond to the very real needs of the dying and bereaved.