

Jewish Views of the Afterlife

By Simcha Paull Raphael

Book Review by Sam Menahem Ph.D.

Dr. Simcha Raphael has written the quintessential book on the afterlife from a Jewish point of view. Many Jews today think that Jews have no belief in an afterlife. He points out from the very beginning that this is not true. Many sources of afterlife teachings are covered: biblical sources, apocryphal literature, rabbinic Judaism, medieval midrash, medieval philosophy, kabbalah and Hasidic tales. Comparisons are also made with Tibetan Buddhist beliefs. The result is a marvelous text worthy of reading on a number of levels. It may be read out of intellectual curiosity, one's own existential dread or as a self-help book in times of grief and mourning. Actually, it works on all of these levels. It can be read cover to cover for its extensive knowledge and references or as a resource to help oneself. Dr. Raphael also suggests that it can be read as a text for knowledge-or read randomly by opening to any page that may be needed synchronistically at that very moment. However it is read, it is an excellent addition to the knowledge of the afterlife journey of the soul.

This book review is not exactly what I had originally intended to be. Several months ago I had obtained the second edition of this book, as I had enjoyed the first edition, fifteen years ago. I wrote a very favorable review of the first edition, which, as I will explain has been improved in many ways in the second edition. Much has changed in popular culture in the last fifteen years. The idea of life continuing after death is much more widely accepted and this process is continuing. This new version is one step in this continuing cultural change. The new edition does a wonderful job of merging spirituality and religion. The last chapter in particular, points to way for integrating the religious rituals of Judaism in times of death, loss and grief with mystical philosophies-creating a spiritual religious synthesis that can be very helpful in times of loss and grief. I was soon to find out how helpful and practical this synthesis of ritual with mysticism could help others. I had been slowly reading and assimilating this terrific guide to the afterlife, preparing to review it. Then, my own life intruded. My mother died, leading to this very personal review.

To be more accurate, my mom passed into the spiritual dimension. This dimension, so beautifully described by Dr. Raphael is a state of mind or consciousness. As I went through the traditional Jewish funeral, burial and shivah period. I found myself often thinking of what her soul was experiencing at each stage. I contacted Dr. Raphael and he suggested I focus on Chapter 11-not the financial one-but chapter 11 of this book. I did so and was very grateful for its reappearance in my life. Chapter 11 guides the reader through the mourning period. I have long believed in afterlife and reincarnation-but I have never found a better guide through the stages. Chapter 11 assumes that the contents are helping not only the mourner but the departed soul itself. A brief backtrack into Chapter 10, "A contemporary psychological model of the afterlife," is in order here.

Dr. Raphael guides us through the dying process-the clear light, the angelic spirits, the life review, the dissolution of elements and the severing of the life cord. He then guides us through the separation from the body, the emotional purification of Gehenna, the final completion of the personality in the lower Garden of Eden and the heavenly repose of the soul in the higher Garden of Eden. This psychological model is based upon careful research of Jewish Sources like Kabbalah and Hasidic tales, as well as other sources like Tibetan Buddhism. I find it the best single description of the afterlife journey in any book I have ever read on the topic.

When I received a call from the nursing home that my mom was near the end, I raced up there and was joined by my wife, daughter and son in law. Although she was not responsive, I described where she was going and told her it was OK. I emphasized the part about meeting the dead relatives as I thought it would be most helpful to her. Though my son in law does not know of this philosophy, he greatly aided the process by singing her the She'mah-which was written on a pillow in her room. We finally left at 11PM and she passed over at 2AM.

We all went through the shock of the passing and shifted into high gear the next morning to arrange the funeral. With the aid of a compassionate funeral director we quickly arranged for the funeral and burial the next day-a Friday. The turnout for the funeral was large, especially for a 92 year old woman. I kept in mind Rabbi Raphael's idea that her spirit was still hovering around the body. I thought of it as I identified the body, knowing she was near- by in some form and would hear my eulogy. I gave a eulogy that I thought honored her long and good life. I emphasized her "joie de vivre", love of music, dancing and even her fondness for positive thinking books- ranging from Norman Vincent Peale to Deepak Chopra and Wayne Dyer. She was also the first distant healer in our family, steadfastly maintaining that, "sending the waves" could help heal others. I finished with 2 songs, one that I wrote for her and her personal favorite, "When you're smiling." There was a very spiritual feeling after the traditional prayers, the singing and the final eulogy and chanting of the traditional -"el male rachamim" by Rabbi Simon Glustrom, a good friend. I felt as if we were helping her to let go of her body and realize she needed to move on in the afterlife process.

Shivah was quite unusual, due to the freak October snowstorm that cut off our power. Dr. Raphael correctly points out, that shivah is both for the mourners AND for the departed soul. As we chanted the mourner's kaddish, in the dark, there was almost a palpable presence of my dear departed mother. After the last night's mourner's kaddish I felt that the proper ending for this person, was another rendition of, "When you're smiling." Many joined in, creating closure for we the living and mom, the departed soul. This singing and(which replaced the usual walk around the block) was heard by her soul. With the help of this book-I really felt some closure of shivah. I felt she was on the way for her emotional purification in Gehenna. Last night I had a dream about mom. It was no ordinary dream. I had just finished reading Chapter 11 before going to bed. Dr. Raphael suggested that we can keep in communication with the departed through prayers and dreams. Obviously, my unconscious mind was ready to communicate with her. I apologized to her for my uncompassionate behavior as a young man and she accepted the apology. This was helpful to both of us. I was relieved of guilt and she felt loved and understood. It was part of her emotional purification, described in part three of Chapter Ten. The

process will continue for both of us. I will continue to read and ponder –both to heal myself and her departed soul.

My personal experience with this book was that of extreme helpfulness. It can help any reader both understand and accept the ideas that there is an afterlife and what to expect when you or a loved one goes there. Contrary to the rampant scientific materialist viewpoints of death (You are dead and that is it!) This book goes through multiple Jewish sources in a scholarly manner-concluding that there is ample evidence from Jewish and non-Jewish sources that there is some form of consciousness after death. If this is true, then we need a guide to help us. This book is a wonderful guide!