

Imagination is Stronger than Death

Review of Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, third revised edition. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019, 480 pages.

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Death Isn't What It Used to Be

We are living through wide-ranging social changes around death. There is a growing shift from sad funerals to cheerful celebrations of life. Medically assisted dying is legal in an increasing number of US states and all of Canada. There is an international Death Café movement for casual conversations about the end of life. Surveys tell us that millennials believe in life after death more, not less, than older generations, as popular culture cranks out images of hell, heaven, and reincarnation. All this as brilliant minds are working to make us immortal, whether by copying our neural circuits into software, or by finding and modifying the genes that age our bodies. In the absence of a scientific breakthrough, though, our deaths may come through old age or climate change – as signs at recent demonstrations put it – but all of us are going to die. What then?

Whether or not you expect to live on after death, Simcha Paull Raphael's *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* is one of the most useful and enjoyable resources for thinking about this poignant and unavoidable question.

For Readers Who Are Not Jewish

If you would like to believe that your life will continue after you die, you may be dismayed by the general impression that Judaism is a this-worldly religion which teaches that you only “live on” in other people's memories. The more something is called into question, the harder it becomes to believe. Most religions we hear of have some kind of afterlife teachings, but if Judaism did not, that would make the whole idea a bit less plausible.

Raphael's book shows that, on the contrary, most Jews, over at least the past two thousand years, have anticipated living on after death. And Jewish afterlife beliefs are not only vague and philosophical. Some are vivid in their imagery, detailed in their attention to the levels of paradise (Gan Eden) and purgatory (Gehenna) or the workings of reincarnation. Stories of ghosts and wandering spirits abound, ahead of bodily resurrection at the end of time. Hasidic spiritual masters became guides not only for their living disciples, but for those whose souls needed further guidance after death.

Jewish denial of an afterlife is mostly a modern phenomenon, largely North American and especially salient after the holocaust – when the sheer volume of death overwhelmed traditional belief. (Raphael's chapter on this issue is tellingly titled “Is There Afterlife after Auschwitz?”) But the first edition of Raphael's book, twenty-five years ago (1994), both manifested and helped to cause a change in outlook – and with it, changes in practice. There has been a revival of the volunteer burial societies (*hevra kadisha*) which care for dead bodies and departed souls. Women have begun reclaiming the nearly lost custom of making candles before Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, for the souls of the living and the dead. (See Jane Enkin,

“Soul Candles,” http://telshemesh.org/tishrei/soul_candles.html. On *hevra kadisha* and much else, see Raphael’s Da’at Institute, <http://www.daatinstitute.net/>.)

These trends are not limited to any one branch of Judaism. Hasidism and other tradition-oriented streams of Orthodox Judaism never abandoned faith in life after death, and they are growing by leaps and bounds. Raphael is part of the small but influential Jewish Renewal movement, which cultivates spiritual experience and revels in imagining the spirit’s journeys after leaving the body. Following in Raphael’s footsteps, Conservative and Reform rabbis have published books espousing Jewish afterlife beliefs (among the first, Neil Gillman’s 1997 *The Death of Death*). All in all, “Jews don’t believe in an afterlife, why should we?” has ceased to be a convincing argument.

And the many Jewish afterlife teachings and stories in Raphael’s book are abundant raw material for anyone who wants to imagine what might come after death. Raphael provides a model of how one might do this in his chapter “A Contemporary Psychological Model of the Afterlife” – which he bases, consciously and openly, on a mixture of selected Jewish ideas, elements of Tibetan Buddhism, twentieth-century thanatology, and humanistic psychology. By “showing his work” in this chapter, he effectively gives permission to any of us to draw freely on our own reading and experiences to imagine our own afterlife.

For Jewish Readers

For Jews raised with modern post-holocaust skepticism, the great accomplishment of this book has been to demonstrate that it is “kosher” to imagine life continuing after death. No one should be embarrassed or ashamed to speak about feelings of connection with the dead, or dreams and other experiences of communication with departed loved ones. Raphael shares moving accounts of the emotional impact for bereaved Jews of being given “permission” to explore these feelings and experiences. He is guided by pastoral concern for what it is like to approach death or to be in mourning. The closing chapter, “Afterlife and the Renewal of Jewish Death Rituals,” seeks to increase the meaningfulness of customs like “sitting shiva” (remaining at home and receiving guests for the week after a loved one’s funeral) and saying Kaddish (the prayer designated for mourners during synagogue services). These are widely practiced among secularized Jews, but without their traditional connection with the afterlife journey of the soul; Raphael’s pastoral sense is that reaffirming the connection with the dead will be healing for the living as well. If you are Jewish and have not yet read this book, this new, expanded edition gives you the opportunity to receive Raphael’s caring gift, based on a lifetime of research, written clearly and accessibly.

For Skeptics of All Backgrounds

“Early in my adult life, I found that acceptance of the finality of death was important to [me].” So writes Rabbi Dr. Arthur Green in his foreword to this new edition (p. xxxi). For anyone who shares this preference for death as the end of the story, not a new beginning, there is also support in *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*. Though the ostensible aim of the book is to advocate for belief, it is a resource for skeptics as well.

I will focus on the two major additions to the new edition: more material on reincarnation, and a new chapter on Yiddish literature. The topic of *gilgul*, reincarnation or transmigration, is one that Raphael is often asked about; and many of his interlocutors are

“astonished” that it is part of Jewish tradition (pp. xxxiv, 224). (It does seem like an example of Hindu influence on Judaism – perhaps along the medieval trade routes that extended from Spain to China. But in fact various ancient Near Eastern religions also teach reincarnation – see Gerard Russell’s fascinating work of religious journalism, *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms*. So reincarnation may be a part of the ancient Jewish heritage, though it was only put clearly into writing in the early Middle Ages.)

In any tradition, reincarnation provides an answer to the recurrent Jewish and human experience of suffering and oppression. When bad things happen to good people, it may be that those good people were bad in previous lives. Their suffering does not reflect their present good lives, but it is purging their souls of the accumulated dross of earlier incarnations (see p. 228). (The great Israeli rabbi Ovadia Yosef took this tradition as far as possible when he suggested in a sermon, in the year 2000, that the victims of the holocaust had sinned terribly in previous lives and were reincarnated to make atonement through their deaths. The outraged public reaction was a measure of today’s religious illiteracy. Yosef was taken to have slandered the six million as sinners who deserved to die. In fact he was absolving them of any guilt in their lifetimes, and making sense of their deaths by diagnosing a burden of “karma,” though he would not have used that term. He would say that most of us carry such a burden to one extent or another.)

Taking a skeptical perspective for a moment, however, we can see all this as straightforward wish fulfillment. We live in a world where good things happen to bad people, and bad things to good people, all too often. Wouldn’t it be nicer if it all made sense? Wouldn’t it be better if even the holocaust worked out for good in the end?

Fortunately for critical readers, Raphael is a conscientious historian, who includes many facts that do not support his case for embracing belief. This includes the fact that reincarnation contradicts other longstanding Jewish afterlife teachings or, at best, is hard to reconcile with them. The whole treasury of Jewish afterlife stories and ideas that Raphael presents us with, in chronological order, in chapters three through ten, is full of disagreements and contradictions. This adds to the interest of these teachings but perhaps diminishes their credibility.

Raphael also mentions an important theme in Jewish reincarnation teachings: that each Jew is bound to fulfill all the mitzvot (commandments of the Torah as understood by rabbinic tradition). A Jew who did not fulfill some specific mitzvah – honouring parents, fasting on Yom Kippur, or whatever it might be – will have to return in another lifetime to do it right (p. 234). This seems unlikely to inspire anyone who is not committed to Orthodox Judaism – but it is an intriguing example of how culturally specific afterlife teachings are. In fact, throughout his book, Raphael draws attention to “afterlife teachings as a reflection of culture” (p. 323). I do not know how Raphael reconciles his stated preference for detailed afterlife beliefs with this simple observation.

A reincarnation teaching that could have been included, but was not, comes from the Hasidic spiritual master Nakhman of Breslov. It is based on the mystical tradition that a person’s soul is made up of at least three different aspects (*nefesh*, *ruakh*, *neshamah*, see Raphael pp. 197-200). Rabbi Nakhman taught that each of these aspects reincarnates separately. My *nefesh*, *ruakh*, and *neshamah* will each go their own way after I die, combine with appropriate soul-aspects that inhabited other people, and be reincarnated in new configurations. The particular combination of soul-aspects that made up my soul in this life will never exist again. This is a striking example of how the deeper insights of religious traditions may coincide with the conclusions of skeptics. Rabbi Nakhman would agree with atheists on this point: The “me” I know will cease to exist when I die.

Rabbi Nakhman, who died in 1810, was one of the great storytellers in the Yiddish language – the German Jewish dialect which became the widespread vernacular of Eastern European Jewry. But Raphael's new chapter on Yiddish literature focuses, surprisingly, on nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors who left their religious upbringings behind. The chapter presents itself as reading their fiction and drama "against the grain" – looking for traces of folk beliefs about the soul, spirits of the dead, and so on.

Raphael's first example of this kind of reading, however, proves distinctly unworkable. So much so that I suspect he is doing it on purpose. In Sholem Aleichem's famous series of stories about Tevye the dairyman and his family, from the turn of the 19th-20th centuries, there is a plot line about the fading tradition of arranged marriages. After promising his daughter's hand in marriage to a widower, Tevye discovers that she wants to marry a young man who loves her, "the tailor Motl Kamzoyl." To get his wife Golde's agreement to this love match, Tevye tells her of a nightmare in which the widower's late wife and Golde's grandmother appeared to him from the world of the dead. The two of them forbade the arranged marriage and designated Motl the tailor as the proper bridegroom. Raphael's summary depicts Tevye as "certain of his experience" and "frightened" by the dream (pp. 282-283). This supports the conclusion that "the message that Sholem Aleichem communicates to our age [is] that consciousness survives bodily death" (p. 284).

But this conclusion must be tongue-in-cheek, because the story is clear that Tevye is making up the dream, hoodwinking his wife, as an excuse to break off the arranged engagement and let his daughter marry as she wishes. In its context, there is deep irony in Tevye's invention of a dream about two departed matriarchs of traditional society, weaponizing them against the arranged marriage tradition. Traditional Jew though Tevye might be, he could scarcely do this unless his own outlook included a healthy measure of skepticism about any chance of communication with the dead. If the widow and the grandmother knew the story he was telling about them, they would – so to speak – roll over in their graves!

Though relatively few people today have read Sholem Aleichem, at least in Yiddish, very many know the musical "Fiddler on the Roof," which recreates this episode accurately – and all of them will realize that Raphael's ostensible interpretation of Sholem Aleichem's message does not work. I conclude that, in the great tradition of Maimonides and other subtle and controversial Jewish thinkers, Raphael is concealing his real purpose and leaving it to us readers to figure out.

In the rest of the chapter, Raphael in fact analyzes how various Yiddish authors made use of rapidly vanishing afterlife traditions to think about other matters altogether. In I. L. Peretz's early story "What Is the Soul?", the answer to the title's question turns out to be another meaning of the Hebrew word *neshamah* as used in Yiddish – an endearment for a loved one. The hero's philosophical speculations end when he finds romantic love (p. 290). Peretz's more famous tale "Bontshe the Silent" uses the folklore of heavenly judgment to present a "cry for social justice" (p. 291). S. An-sky's great play *The Dybbuk* was partly an act of cultural preservation, a grab-bag of stories and motifs from his ethnographic research (pp. 295-296), and partly a reworking of traditional possession tales into a modern story of romantic love, destined yet doomed. Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories of spirit possession, sinners in hell, and debates over the afterlife explore themes that mattered to him: "the dangers inherent in mass hysteria" (p. 308), the flaws of "the varying ideologies of Jewish life" (p. 316), the sadness and confusion of the post-holocaust era (p. 320), and, always, erotic obsession. None of these authors believed in these elements of folk religion; they would probably have written them off as superstition (except for Bashevis, who cultivated superstition!) The same is true of Sholem Aleichem, who used Tevye's

“dream” to dramatize the breakdown of marriage conventions, the rival claims of parental authority and parental love, and the possibility of subversive maneuvers within a traditional framework.

In other words, these authors made use of afterlife traditions not to endorse them, and certainly not to teach them to future generations, but because they were (to borrow a phrase from Claude Lévi-Strauss) “good to think with.” A freethinking reader can extrapolate from this chapter to all kinds of stories and ideas about life after death. For example, all talk of heaven (or Gan Eden) is an expression of what we consider most important in this life; and so heaven is imagined differently depending whether the imaginer’s priority is God, enlightenment, revenge on enemies, or closeness to family and friends. Talking about what we hope for after we die is an evocative way of expressing what really matters to us now. All talk about life after death is really about life before death.

Is It Still Kosher Not to Believe?

Nevertheless, a generation after Raphael’s book, in its first edition, made belief in an afterlife “kosher” beyond traditionalist Orthodox communities, Jewish readers may have the opposite concern. Is it still kosher to think that – in the immortal words of William Burroughs as relayed by Jack Kerouac – “when you die you’re just dead, that’s all”?

I would argue that disbelief remains a kosher option. Raphael is very clear that an afterlife plays a vanishingly small part in the earliest sacred text of Judaism (and Christianity) – the Hebrew Bible. “In patriarchal and Mosaic times, even in the days of the Israelite tribal confederacy, the Bible has nothing to say about the fate of the individual after death, and there is certainly no notion of an individual afterlife experience for the soul” (p. 34). (This basically refers to the first seven books of the Bible – the Torah together with Joshua and Judges. It looks as if Raphael assumes that the books of the prophets, where we can find occasional hints of life after death, were written later. Some academic scholars, however, argue that the chronological order of composition was the other way around. This opens up the possibility that the writers of the most authoritative parts of the Hebrew Bible deliberately rejected earlier afterlife aspirations. Food for thought!)

In later Judaism, belief in the future resurrection of the dead became broadly accepted as a dogma, based on a statement by the towering medieval philosopher and rabbi Maimonides. Liberal Jews today, though, do not consider themselves bound by medieval formulations. But even a great Orthodox Jew of our times, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, a scientist, Israeli anti-Occupation activist, and bold religious thinker, who died the year that *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* was first published, concluded from Maimonides’ own wording that this “resurrection” is metaphorical. It is linked in Maimonides’ writings with the Talmudic dictum “the wicked are called dead even when alive; the righteous are called living even when they are dead.”

Leibowitz also said that while we certainly find in Jewish tradition the idea that we have a soul, all Jewish traditions about how to live – the mitzvot (commandments) and all the moral and ethical teachings – are about bodily human beings. There is not a single mitzvah that applies to the soul; and therefore, Leibowitz says with his usual startling clarity, the idea of a soul has no religious meaning.

To this we can add a well-known Hasidic story: It was once revealed to the first Hasidic spiritual master, Israel Baal Shem Tov, that his “portion in the world-to-come” – his prospect of

an afterlife – had been taken away. Immediately he began to dance with joy, saying: “Now at last I can serve God without any ulterior motive – with no hope of a reward!”

When all is said and done, Raphael concludes his book with a thought as agreeable to skeptics as to believers, focusing on living people in the here and now: “Jewish tradition teaches us to remember the dead: doing so will, in the long run, help us enhance the quality of life. Long after people die, their legacy lives on inside of us” (p. 396).

Something for Everyone

So *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* has something to say to all of us. For those who want to believe that death is not the end, it is a treasury of resources for picturing what might come next. For skeptics, it suggests insights about why people talk so much about an afterlife and, perhaps, what they really mean by it. If you are undecided, this book might help you make up your mind; one way or another, it will nourish your imagination.

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