

# Temple Israel

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## **BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO THE AFTERLIFE: A CONVERSATION WITH SIMCHA RAPHAEL**

The third annual Ilene Levin Scholar-in-Residence program, May 29th-31st, 2015 at Temple Israel features several presentations by Reb Simcha Raphael, Ph.D., psychotherapist, educator, rabbinic pastor, founding director of the DA'AT Institute for Death Awareness, Advocacy and Training, and author of *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* (Second Edition). He lives with his family in the Philadelphia area.

***“In Judaism, death is a window, not a wall. Unlike science, where dead is dead and there ain’t nothing happening, in Judaism, as with most religions, the world of the living and the world of the dead are connected.”***

***Simcha Raphael***

*Simcha, can you share with us how events in your own life have influenced your interest in exploring the afterlife?*

“I learned at a very young age that talking openly about grief and about those who died can be very healing for families. My mother was 10 years old when her father was killed tragically in a car accident. In 1955, my mother lost her mother as well. I knew this grandmother; she was very dear to me as a child. My mother spoke frequently of her mother. Remembering her mother's life and the wisdom she imparted, and at the same time grieving her loss, were intricately interwoven. My philosophy of death and grief was learned by osmosis from my mother. We spoke openly of the dead and remembered their lives and legacy. In a loving sense, I learned that the connection between the living and the dead continues long after physical death.”

*How does Judaism provide effective ways of mourning and remembering the dead?*

“Healthy bereavement can be accomplished by honoring the grief one goes through; by making use of traditional Jewish death practices; and by staying open to the ever-changing mystery of the connection between the world of the living and the world of the dead.”

*Many contemporary Jewish people simply don't believe in the possibility of an afterlife.*

“There is a mistaken belief in modern Jewish life that Judaism does not uphold a belief in the afterlife. This is not the case. In the pre-modern world of Issac Bashevis Singer and the Hasidic masters, there is never any question about survival of the soul after death. In fact, throughout the history of Judaism, there has been a sense of belief in afterlife. Even the historical Jewish understanding of the Yizkor prayers, including the Kaddish prayer, is that they are efficacious ways of attuning to the soul of the deceased. During Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Passover and Shavuot, as the Yizkor candle burns for 24 hours, the whole day lends itself to having meaningful family conversations about life's finality, loss and grief, and questions about afterlife and the world beyond.”

*What has changed in our contemporary Jewish life and practice that we have lost touch with spirituality, mysticism, and the afterlife?*

“Modern Jews have been influenced by secular thinking, and become rationalistic because of scientific thinking. We need to reclaim the traditions and we'll discover that Judaism has wisdom that can be applied in a contemporary, functional way. We need to rediscover that Jewish mysticism can be a resource in a way that we can relate to today.”

*In your view, do all sentient beings have souls, that can have the possibility of an afterlife, including pets?*

“My hunch is yes, but I haven't yet found any Jewish sources to confirm.”

*Any final thoughts?*

“Life after death is not a geographic location. Death is a series of journeys, of leaving. First there's a letting go of our attachment to the body. Then there is a clearing of unresolved issues in Gehenna. In my view, it's more cleansing than torture, more rehabilitation than penal colony. Third is harvesting one's spiritual attributes – what we've accrued – as I like to say, how much money is in our spiritual bank account. Is it enough for a Motel 6 or a fancy apartment? There are seven realms of Gan Eden we go to based on our level of spiritual development. And finally, there's a return to God. There is an incredible range of belief, but this is a template.

Interview by Jim Perlman, April 2015.

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