

What Happens After We Die? Author Simcha Raphael Answers Questions on the Afterlife

By [Erica Silverman](#) -
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Judaism is notably ambiguous about the afterlife.

Jewish law instructs Jews on specific practices, such as funeral and burial rites, and shiva, but concepts like the immortality of the soul, the world to come and the resurrection of the dead are largely left up to interpretation.



Ordained as a rabbinic pastor by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Mt. Airy psychotherapist Simcha Raphael is author of the classic [Jewish Views of the Afterlife](#), whose 25th-anniversary edition was recently published by Rowman & Littlefield. The founder of the [Da'at Institute](#), which specializes in “death awareness, advocacy and training,” Raphael speaks widely about dying, bereavement and the afterlife; he’s leading a lunchtime talk on the subject at [Gratz College](#) in August.

A fellow of the [Rabbis Without Borders](#) network, Raphael is an adjunct professor of religion and theology at [La Salle University](#) and provides personal counseling and training for rabbis and health professionals dealing with issues like miscarriage, funeral and burial, kaddish, shiva, yizkor and yahrzeit.

What is at the heart of the work you do?

Judaism has extensive but little-known teachings on the afterlife that can help individuals and families deal with dying, bereavement and end-of-life issues. I am working to help revitalize an understanding of traditional Jewish values around death and dying; the idea that death is inherently part of life; simplicity in death and burial; the spiritual efficacy of honoring Jewish mourning rituals; and the notion that death is a transition to a world beyond.

In the modern period, Jews have lost touch with our beliefs about life after death, but in the era of Jewish mysticism (12th to 16th centuries), it was a common theme. At 21, my

closest friend was killed in a car accident. He appeared to me in a dream, and I struggled to explain the experience of feeling his presence after he died.

I began researching life after death in Judaism, with applications for working with the dying and bereaved for my psychology dissertation.

What type of counseling and instruction do you offer at the Da'at Institute?

I offer bereavement counseling, and transpersonal psychotherapy, a clinical practice that integrates both psychological and spiritual experiences into its framework, using resources such as prayer and meditation.

I help people realize that the trauma of grief is normal. When you retell your story, you are releasing parts of the trauma from the body, which can lead to recovery.

The third edition of Jewish Views of the Afterlife was released on the 25th anniversary of the book's first publication. What new information can readers expect?

First published in 1994, the text presents a historical overview of Jewish ideas about life after death from biblical times to the modern period. It also has a description of the renewal of Jewish death rituals, and how that impacts the Jewish psychology of experiencing death.

The new edition further addresses the question of Jewish beliefs about reincarnation and Kabbalah. Jewish teachings on reincarnation say that if we have not fulfilled all of the mitzvot in our lifetime, then we will come back in another life to fulfill them.

Reincarnation can also be a punishment, and some souls reincarnate to help other souls in their life journey.

Today, people want a spiritual approach to dying and death, and my work is reclaiming these lost traditions of the afterlife.

Tell us about the new chapter "Spirits, Ghosts and Dybbuks (evil spirits) in Yiddish Literature."

In the earlier edition, I maintained that ideas of the afterlife in Judaism diminished after the period of the Enlightenment. The new edition has a whole chapter exploring spirits and ghosts that present in the writings of Shalom Aleichem, Issac Bashevis Singer and elsewhere in Yiddish literature, from the later Medieval period to modern times.

It was common in the Eastern European shtetl for people to see spirits of the deceased in dreams or around cemeteries. What we learn from these kinds of teachings is that people often feel the presence of deceased loved ones in dreams, prayers and in other ways. There is a window between the world of the dead and the living, not a wall.

What happens after we die?

In Judaism, the afterlife is a multi-staged journey of transformation. In the first stage, the person releases attachments to their physical body. One may see deceased loved ones as they leave their body, welcoming them into the world beyond, and one may have a vision of a review of their life's deeds.

In the second phase, one goes through a purification process of any unresolved emotions, often described as painful, but you may have help from loved ones who are still alive, offering prayers on your behalf.

The third stage is called the heavenly Garden of Eden, where one merits divine reward, and there are said to be seven realms that correspond to the level of one's spiritual development upon their death. In some cases, this is the end of journey, or one may prepare for reincarnation.

There is no eternal damnation, only a process of purification. Although, there are no final answers on the mystery of life and death.

