

## **AFTERLIFE IN RABBINIC TRADITION: OLAM HABA AND VISIONS OF THE ANGEL OF DEATH**

### **1. OLAM HABA - THE RABBINIC PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE AND DEATH**

Rabbi Jacob said: **This world [Olam HaZeh]** is like a vestibule before **the World to Come [Olam HaBa]**. Prepare yourself in the vestibule that you may enter into the banquet hall. And further, he used to say :“Better is one hour of repentance and good works in This World [Olam HaZeh] than the whole life of the World to Come [Olam HaBa]. Better is *one hour of bliss in the World to Come* than the whole of life in this world.” (Mishna Avot 4: 16-17)

He who accepts the pleasures of this world [**Olam HaZeh**] is deprived of the pleasures of the World to Come [**Olam HaBa**] (**ARN 28, 43a**).

When King David died, Solomon, his son sent this inquiry to the *Bet Ha-Midrash*: 'My father is dead and lying in the sun; and the dogs of my father's house are hungry, what shall I do? They sent back this answer: “Feed the dogs first and then attend to your dead father.... **living dogs take precedence over a dead king.**” (**Shab. 30b**)

### **2. OLAM HABA - POST-MORTEM OR MESSIANIC?**

Not like this world will be the World to Come. In this world one has the trouble to harvest grapes and press them; but **in the World to Come a person will bring a single grape in a wagon or a ship, store it in the corner of his house, and draw from it enough wine to fill it a large flagon...**There will not be a grape which will not yield thirty measures of wine (**Keth. 111b**).

My Torah will guide you in your path in this world; it will watch over you in your sleep, at the hour of death; and when you awake, it will converse with you in the Olam Haba. (**Sifre on Lev. 18:4**)

The story is told that when Rabbi Abahu was about to depart from this life, he **beheld all the good things that were stored up for him in Olam Haba**, and he rejoiced (**Ex. R. 52:3**).

There is none to be compared beside You, O Lord our God, **in this world**, neither is there any beside You, O Lord our King, for **the life of the World to Come [Ha-Olam Haba]**; there is none but You, O our Redeemer, for the **days of the Messiah [Yemot Ha-Mashiakh]**; neither is there any like unto You, O our Savior, for the **resurrection of the dead [Tekhiyat Ha-Metim]**. (**from Shabbat morning liturgy**)

### **3. GEHENNA**

There are seven names for Gehenna: **Sheol** [Jonah 2:2]; **Abbadon**, or Destruction [Ps. 88:12]; **Be'er Shakhat**, or Corruption [Ps. 16:10]; **Bor Sha'on**, or Horrible Pit and **Tit Ha'Yaven**, or Miry Clay [Ps. 40:3], **Tzalmavet**, or Shadow of Death [Ps. 107:10], and **Eretz Ha-Takhtit**, the Nether World, which is a tradition [Moses receive at Mount Sinai] (Erub. 19a).

...there are seven storeys for the wicked in Gehinnom, their names being: **Sheol**, **Abbadon** [Destruction], **Tzalmavet** [Shadow of Death], **Eretz Takhtit** [Nether World], **Eretz Neshiyah** [Realm of Forgetfulness], **Gehinnom**, and **Dumah** [Silence] (**Midr. Ps. 11:6**).



## GEHENNA AND THE RABBINIC WORLDVIEW

Rabbi Eliezer asked Rabbi Joshua: “What should a man do **to escape the judgement of Gehenna?**” He replied: “Let him **occupy himself with good deeds**” (**Midr. Prov. 17:1, 42b**)

...one who visits the sick (Ned. 40a), or observes [the practice of] three meals on the Shabbat is saved from the retribution of Gehenna (Shabbat 118a); If in reciting the *Shema*, one pronounces the letters distinctly, Gehenna is cooled for him (**Ber. 15a**).

...he who has Torah, good deeds, humility and fear of heaven will be saved from punishment [in Gehenna] (**Pesikta Rabbati 50.1**); ... people who study Torah will be released from torments of Gehenna (**Midrash Prov. 1:5; 2:21**).

## DURATION OF PUNISHMENT IN GEHENNA

heretics, informers, scoffers [*epikorsim*], and those who have rejected the words of Torah and denied the belief in the resurrection are sentenced to Gehenna “**for all generations**” (**RH 17a**).

...after going down to Gehenna and receiving the punishment due him, the sinner is forgiven from all his iniquities, and like an arrow from the bow he is *flung forth from Gehenna* (**Pesikta Rabbati 53.2**).

## 4. GAN EDEN - A REALM OF MINISTERING ANGELS

Gan Eden has two gates of ruby, by which stand sixty myriads of ministering angels. The luster of the face of each of them glistens like the splendor of the firmament. When a righteous person arrives, they divest him in white robes of the clouds of glory, set two crowns upon his head, one made of gems and pearls and the other of gold... each person has a chamber allotted to him by himself according to the honor due him. (**Yalkut Shimoni, Bereshit 20**).

## GAN EDEN AND THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

Seven things were created before the world was created: Torah, repentance, Gan Eden, Gehenna, the Throne of Glory, the Temple and the name of the Messiah (Pes. 54a)

The Holy Blessed One created 3 objects on each day: on the first, heaven, earth and light; on the second, the firmament, Gehenna and the angels; on the third, trees, herbs and Gan Eden (Gen. R., 9:9).

## GAN EDEN - PURPOSE OF GAN EDEN

Why has God created Gan Eden and Gehenna? That one might deliver from the other (PRK 30; 191b) Before the righteous enter Gan Eden, God shows them the place they might have merited in Gehenna; similarly, the wicked sentenced to Gehenna are first shown the place they might have been accorded in Gan Eden (Midrash to Ps., 6:6; 31:6).

## GAN EDEN - POST-MORTEM OR MESSIANIC?

In Olam Haba, the Holy Blessed One will prepare a banquet for the righteous in Gan Eden, and there will be no need to provide balsam or perfumes, because a north wind and a south wind will sweep through and sprinkle all the romantic plants of Gan Eden so that they will yield their fragrance (Num. R. 13:2).

[In passing from this world, R. Yohanan ben Zakkai exclaimed]: “...there are two ways before me, one heading towards Gan Eden and the other to Gehinnom, and I do not by which I shall be taken” (Ber. 28b).



## 5. TECHIYAT HAMETIM - RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

There is no section of the Torah which does not imply the doctrine of Resurrection, but we have not the capacity to expound it in this sense (**Sifre Deut. 306; 132a**).

The Holy Blessed One will burrow the earth before them and their bodies will roll through the excavation like bottles, and when they arrive at the land of Israel their soul will be reunited to them. (**P. Keth. 35b**)

## 6. OTZAR/TZROR HA-HAYYIM – DIVINE TREASURY

...souls of the righteous and of the wicked alike ascend above, but those of the righteous are placed in the divine treasury [otzar], while those of the wicked are cast about on earth. (**Ecc. R. 3:18**).

souls of the righteous are in safekeeping under the Throne of Glory", as it is said: 'Your life shall be bound up in the bond of life [tzor ha-hayyim] with the Lord your God'(I Sam. 25:29)" (**ARN 12**).

## 7. VISIONS OF THE AFTER-DEATH JOURNEY

As they are about to depart from this world, the righteous are shown the reward rightfully due to them, and they rejoice in such sublime vision (**Ex. R. 52:3**).

When a man departs to his eternal home all his deeds are enumerated before him and he is told: "Such and such a thing have you done, in such and such a place on that day." Admitting to justice of the verdict the individual then signs the record shown to him saying, "Rightly have You judged me" (**Taan. 11a**).

Angels are assigned to every human being. And every day they record his deeds, so that everything he does is known to the Holy Blessed One, and everything is put down on his record and marked with a seal... Accordingly, when a righteous man arrives at the end of his days, his recording angels precede him into heaven singing his praise... But when a wicked man dies, a man who did not bring himself to turn in repentance to God, the Holy Blessed One, says to him: "Let your soul be blasted in despair! How many times did I call upon you to repent, and you did not." (**Pesikta Rabbati, 44:8**)

## 8. THE SPIRIT WORLD AND AFTERLIFE IN JEWISH FOLK RELIGION

...a man who fell asleep in a synagogue and was locked in by the sexton [and] awoke to find himself in the midst of... a spirit congregation; to his amazement he discerned the forms of two men who were still among the living. Sure enough, within a few days these two passed away. (**Trachtenberg, p. 62**).

R. Benjamin b. Zerah on his deathbed, promised to warn members of his congregation if any disaster impended. A short while after his demise he appeared in the synagogue & divulged that at the instant of death he had seen a heavenly decree inflicting a persecution upon them. (**Trachtenberg, p. 223**).

## INCANTATION TO BANISH SPIRITS

With consent of the celestial and earthly tribunals I conjure you in the name of God of heaven and of earth, and by all the holy Names, that you desist from pursuing any human, whether man or woman, adult or child, near or far, and that you do them no harm with your body or your spirit or your soul. Your body must lie in its grave until resurrection, your soul must rest in that place where it belongs. I command this upon you with an oath, now and forever. (**Quoted by Trachtenberg, p. 66**).

