

# THE JEWISH CHRONICLE

## Reclaiming, revisiting Jewish afterlife and why it matters

by [Toby Tabachnick, Senior Staff Writer](#)

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Between the world of the living and the world of the dead there is not a wall, but a window, according to Reb Simcha Raphael, a psychotherapist and spiritual director affiliated with the Mt. Airy Counseling Center in Philadelphia, who is an expert on Jewish views of life after death.

And the idea that Jewish tradition does not include a view of the afterlife is a misconception, added Raphael, who also teaches Jewish mysticism at Temple University.

“It is a mistake of modernity,” he said.

*Reb Simcha Raphael (Photo provided)*

Raphael, the author of *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, a guide offering practical assistance for integrating insights from Jewish traditions into the spiritual care of those who are dying or grieving, was in Pittsburgh on Sunday, March 1 to address the New Community Chevra Kadisha of Greater Pittsburgh at its annual Adar 7 dinner.

A presentation by Raphael, open to the public, was held that same afternoon from 1 to 3 p.m. at Tree of Life\*Or L'Simcha, during which he discussed “Twilight between the Worlds: Stories of Ghosts, Wandering Spirits and Reincarnating Souls.”

The 7th of Adar is a special date on the Jewish calendar for members of chevra kadishas (organizations of Jews who tend to the proper preparation of bodies for burial), Raphael noted in an interview prior to his arrival in Pittsburgh.

“That date is said to be the yahrtzeit of Moses’ death,” he said. “Because God handled Moses’ burial, that day became a day for community acknowledgement of a day off for chevra kadishas, a special day to acknowledge the work of chevra kadishas.”

Raphael has had a longtime interest in Jewish views of the afterlife, which began decades ago following the death of his closest friend while still in his 20s, he said. He wrote his doctoral thesis on the subject, and his first job as a psychologist was at a Jewish funeral home.

While modern-day Jews may not be versed in traditional views of the afterlife, such was not the case a few generations ago, Raphael said.



“It was hard-wired into the community that there was an afterlife,” he remarked, but added that those views were lost during the late 19th and early 20th century emigration wave from Eastern Europe to America.

“There was always a sense of life after death in the pre-modern period, in the world of Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Hasidic masters,” he said.

It is Raphael’s intention, he said, “to go back to earlier times to reclaim these teachings.”

He aims to not only educate his audiences on what Judaism has to say about life after death, but also why it matters.

According to longstanding Jewish traditions, said Raphael, the afterlife is not a “geographical thing, but more of a psychological, spiritual journey of the soul.” And some common perceptions among mourners often parallel Jewish teachings about that journey.

During the seven-day period of shiva, for example, mourners often feel the presence of their deceased loved one. That perception, he said, coincides with ancient Jewish beliefs that a soul sticks close to its home in the days immediately following death.

Likewise, there is a Jewish tradition that teaches that for the first year after a person’s death, there is a process in which the soul reconciles unresolved, emotional issues. That time frame corresponds with the time a close relative says Kaddish for the deceased, he noted.

Following the first year after death, according to Jewish tradition, a soul enters the heavenly Garden of Eden, said Raphael. There are seven realms of heaven, and which one a soul merits is determined by his deeds during his life on earth.

While mourners are going through their own process of forgiveness, acceptance or guilt after the death of a loved one, that loved one’s soul “is going through its own process of redemption and healing,” Raphael said.

Another concept based in Jewish tradition is that the world of the living and the world of the dead are not completely distinct from one another. It is very common, for example, for a survivor to be visited by their loved one in a dream or to feel a connection during moments of prayer, he explained. “Staying open to those things is part of the traditional Jewish understanding.”

Through these Jewish teachings, mourners can be helped to cope with their loss.

At the public event last Sunday, Raphael told a series of stories from the Jewish tradition about ghosts and the afterlife.

“I’m a good storyteller,” he said. “And [it’s] a fun way of talking about life after death.”

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