

BOOK REVIEW Edited by David E. Balk

What do Jews believe about the afterlife?

A review of *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* (3rd ed.), by Simcha Paull Raphael. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. 528 pp. (ISBN: 9780742562219). \$36.95. Reviewed by Harold Ivan Smith.

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Introduction

No doubt you have heard, or perhaps used, the cliché, "When hell freezes over." Growing up in the Southern holiness tradition (of the United States), I was exposed to sensational preaching on hell – specifically, the fires of hell. Thus, "hell freezing over" was oxymoronic until I read Simcha Paull Raphael's *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* (third edition) (Raphael, 2019) and discovered that hell, at least, according to some Jewish thinkers, has snow and sleet! (pp. 116 and 140)

An overview

Jewish Views of the Afterlife is something of an encyclopedic review of potential postmortem existences. The author is founder and director of the DA'AT Institute for Death Awareness, Advocacy and Training. The complexity of the topic and the thoroughness of the historical research is evident in the ten-page, single-spaced table of contents. Raphael warns readers early on, "At no point is it really appropriate to speak simply of the Jewish view of the afterlife" (p. 3). Why? Judaism, over four millennia, has evolved through contact with other world civilizations and religions; hence Jewish afterlife perspectives also evolved. Raphael concedes, "Four thousand years of Jewish thought about postmortem survival can be confusing" (p. 3) (and this reviewer would add, particularly to the non-Jewish reader). While the Hebrew

Bible is "an important and necessary starting point," those writings are "certainly not a definitive source for understanding Jewish ideas of life after death" (p. 4), particularly in the last century in the United States. Each of the Jewish traditions (Orthodox, reformed/reconstructionist, Hasidic, Conservative, etc.) have read many of the same texts but understood, appropriated, and appreciated the words and ideas differently.

Raphael periodically asserts through the book: "Judaism has always upheld a belief in life after death" (p. 11). Admittedly, beliefs can be "perplexing and problematic" since "Jews believe many different things" (p. 10) about postmortem existence and some do not believe in an afterlife. This reads as something of a contradiction. Nevertheless, Raphael and many Jews daily recite "Blessed are You who revives the dead" (p. xxvi) an expression which to many Jews is "an essential component in being a believing Jew" (p. xxvi). Raphael notes that given the impact of the Holocaust, skepticism, and reticence to believe in "postmortem survival" became vogue among Jewish intellectuals and writers; thus, there has been a collective loss of awareness of Jewish afterlife traditions. Raphael believes that disbelief is being challenged and will, in time, be reversed. "The wide misconception that Judaism does not believe in life after death has begun to slowly dissipate" (p. xxxv) and maybe, perhaps, accelerated through reading *Jewish Views* and as rabbis, academics and lay readers explore, reference, and teach from the third edition.

Raphael opens the book with broad strokes in surveying the wide spectrum of understanding of afterlife in historic and in modern Judaism. This broad overview is necessary, Raphael believes, given twenty-first-century perspectives that are "bringing about new attitudes toward death and the afterlife" (p. 4). In chapter three, Raphael addresses the biblical foundations for beliefs in an afterlife. That examination is followed by a chapter on Hellenistic Judaism, particularly the Apocrypha and *Pseudepigrapha* which advanced interpretive and visionary depictions of an afterlife fraught with unpleasantness and suffering.

Judaism has long been shaped by the teachings of rabbis and sages. In chapter five, Raphael culls through what he terms "five centuries of diverse, and often incongruous, rabbinic texts" specifically in the Mishnah,

Talmud, and Midrash, which present “a fascinating collage of teachings on life after death” (p. 4). In chapter seven, Raphael guides the reader through the teaching of medieval Jewish philosophers, who attempted to harmonize rationalistic philosophy with traditional Jewish notions of and longings for the survival of the soul. In chapter eight, Raphael presents concepts from the *Zohar* and kabbalistic writings to address the potential of *gilgul* or transmigration of souls or reincarnation. In chapter nine, the author explores the Hasidic teachings which offer a rich folklore tradition.

In this third edition, the author reviews Yiddish literary fiction which has pointed to the afterlife, spirits, and *dybbuks* (disembodied, usually malevolent spirits that possess unsuspecting souls). He extensively mines themes of death and afterlife, which he contends, permeate the writings of Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer. This examination leads to the question: “Given the vast ancient legacy of Judaism’s teachings on the afterlife, how can we best understand life after death in this era... this everchanging contemporary age, which is itself a time of transformation and paradigm shift”? (p. 324)

In chapter 11, drawing on the raw materials in the book’s first 300 pages, Raphael posits his original model – “a contemporary psychological model of the afterlife” (p. 323) “outlining the various stages of the soul’s journey” (pp. 5 and 323) and the author’s “own quintessential view of the afterlife” (p. 5) as a twenty-first-century Jewish academic.

Chapter 12 assumes that “consciousness survives bodily death” (p. 5) as Raphael focuses on the impact of beliefs on the observance of traditional Jewish rituals of “the deathbed, burial, mourning, and memorialization” (p. 5). Thus, the question emerges: How do – how can – Jews honor traditions and rituals and pass on what they find meaningful to future generations? Or imbue them with fresh meaning and relevance? This query is critical given the number of intermarriages in which one partner is Jewish and the other gentile, or if a spouse has converted to Judaism. Also, one must consider those who self-define as “non-observant” Jews and pick and choose what they practice. Moreover, Raphael contends “an exceptionally high percentage of Jews” participate in Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and Sufi spiritual communities (p. 326). What do such individuals teach their children when other family members hold different perspectives and expectations?

Critical analysis

This reviewer has an enormous appreciation for the contributions of Judaism to thanatological practice and to Christian perspectives on death (Jesus and Paul were Jews). Many Jews have a default mode: *This is what we do when death occurs*, particularly when death intrudes as in the traumatic killing during a service in the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh that resulted in the

death of eleven parishioners in October 2018. (In fact, the widespread media coverage of the tragedy provided insights into some Jewish funeral traditions, particularly *this* Jewish congregation’s observances.) Many Jews cannot explain the why for such practices, other than with a nod to Tevye’s proclamation in *Fiddler on the Roof*, “Tradition!” Other Jews dismiss these traditions as inconvenient and outdated. Who, these days, has time to pray the *kaddish*, the 2000-year-old prayer recited in memory of the dead, three times a day in a *minyan* of 10 Jews (10 males in Orthodox Judaism) for 11 months minus a day? Paradoxically, the *kaddish* does not mention death or grief but reaffirms the greatness of God. Many contemporary Jews do not sit *shivah* for the full seven days of active mourning. Raphael concedes that to many contemporary Jews “shivah feels more like an exhausting experience than a consoling one” (p. 381). This has led some families to announce in newspaper death notices their intent to observe *shivah* for a shorter period. Given that death stirs up family issues and tensions, some find the brevity offensive and/or disrespectful. To some secular Jews, the expectation that one will accept responsibility to pray *kaddish* for a deceased parent is too demanding. Some ask: How can what I do directly impact “the fate of the departed soul?” (p. 381). Protesting, “But I don’t believe in this...” may earn a sharp retort, “It is not about what *you* believe, but about what your father believed and your grandfather and your great-grandfather! We are Jews! *This is what we do!*” Given geographic scattering, not everyone lives near a synagogue or a congregation that has 10 men present over age 13.

Raphael offers an “on the other hand” insight: Perhaps, reciting *Kaddish* is not so much for the dead as for the griever’s benefit. Raphael insists, “This communal mourning ritual can provide opportunity for healing and forgiveness between the living and the soul of the disembodied” (p. 381).

The third edition addresses the lingering impact of the Holocaust: Why worship a God who would permit seven million Jews to die? And, as Raphael adds, evolving secularization was already underway a century before the Holocaust as Jews migrated to and acclimated to a dominant Christian America.

Nevertheless, Raphael repeatedly insists throughout the book that “over the course of time Judaism has always affirmed a belief in life after death” (p. 356). It must be noted that not all Jews have affirmed a belief in postmortem existence. Views of afterlife, however, are open to discussion and debate, reflection and refinement, adaptation and discard.

Dying “is a time of profound inner transformation in which the soul leaves behind the physical world – the known world – and gently enters,” what Raphael calls “the mysterious realms of the world beyond” (p. 357), the great unknown. I believe that many grieverers also “enter” into what can be described as “the mysterious realms” of grief. Raphael insists that Jews “recognize a

need to have appropriate rituals and practices that assist the living and dying in escorting the soul on its post-mortem journey" (p. 357). To this reviewer, these "appropriate rituals and practices" equally support the griever. These days, increasingly, some level of support may be offered by the sensitive clinician. Raphael is clear: "The notion of postmortem survival of consciousness needs to be normalized, that is, regarded as part of ordinary understanding of what takes place after death" (p. 395). Thus, "In providing psychological or pastoral counseling to the bereaved, we need to make room for people to speak freely of any perceptions of connection with the deceased loved ones" (p. 395) or, given the prevalence of the dysfunction in families, the dead, loved, or unloved period. The clinician can offer a safe space to examine beliefs about, uncertainties, and fears of an afterlife. Hence, the clinician is called upon initially to offer hospitality to ideas about the afterlife that, personally, seem offensive, outrageous, or implausible. I wish Raphael had offered helpful ideas to address family dysfunction and ritualization and memorialization as well as issues like organ donation and rising rates of cremation.

Reviewer's perspective

As a reviewer, I found the book *Jewish Views* riveting. During the close reading, I began wondering where some of the teachings in the holiness tradition began and how, over time, those beliefs have evolved or are evolving. The reading triggered reflection on the origins and evolutions of my own perspectives on the afterlife, particularly in migration beyond my childhood understandings. I found myself wondering what particular Jewish colleagues in thanatology believe – or once believed – about postmortem existence.

I profited by spending time slowly reading *Jewish Views*. This book – particularly chapter twelve on Jewish death rituals – would enhance the understanding – and, hopefully, the appreciation – for alternative perspectives on the afterlife. Many griever, in my experience, want to believe in a "good" postmortem consciousness but find that prospect challenging given contemporary rationalistic thinking, i.e., "this is all there is." Some griever almost envy the certainty of griever who embrace the comforting consolation, "[N] is up in heaven ..." Or "[N] was called home by God." One annoyed griever asked me, "How do they know that? Have they received a postcard stamped heaven, 'Not to worry, I arrived safely?'"

Thanatologists ask what does *this* particular griever or grieving family believe – or want to believe – about post-mortem existence? Thanatologists can point griever to the wide variety of beliefs or to other griever who have concluded, "I just cannot believe all that."

My criticism of the book comes from Raphael's effusion for Kubler-Ross whom he labels, "the Sigmund Freud of death and dying" (p. 28). I experienced a jolting speedbump in the author's default to Elisabeth Kubler-

Ross's "stages of grief" which he calls "the inherent stages of the bereavement process." (p. 346) *Inherent?* As in permanent or essential? Raphael suggests that praying *Kaddish* for a loved one "helps the individual adjust to the loss of a beloved one" (p. 346). Moreover, by praying *Kaddish*, "the mourner is able to grieve more fully." (I concur with both statements.) Unfortunately, Raphael leaps to the troubling conclusion that by "grieving more fully" the griever can "experience – in Kubler-Ross's terms – the denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance that are the inherent stages of the bereavement process" (p. 346) so that "Eventually, the mourner is moved toward an acceptance of death in the face of personal pain and suffering" (p. 346). To reach such a conclusion, Raphael has to ignore three decades of thanatological research and writing that discounts Kubler-Ross's premise.

For Raphael, who had so thoroughly researched and digested four thousand years of Jewish teaching on the afterlife, not to have surveyed the fresh research in contemporary thanatology literature – some by noted Jewish thanatologists – is an error that cannot be overlooked.

I was troubled by the reality that in a third edition published in 2019, less than thirty sources in a fifteen-page, single-spaced bibliography have been published since 2000. And that no Jewish scholar or practitioner in the Association for Death Education and Counseling was cited. I concede that Raphael may have read their extensive contributions to the literature but not cited them directly.

Nevertheless, an awareness of *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* is important for thanatologists.

I read and reflected on *Jewish Views* through my writing on the spirituality of Eleanor Roosevelt, whose thinking was influenced by many Jews. Eleanor desperately wanted to believe that she would again see her first-born Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr., who died at age seven months in 1909. Eleanor also desperately wanted to see her father who had died mired in scandal in 1894. Indeed, on her deathbed Eleanor pointedly asked a priest, "Is my father in hell?" Eleanor told the legendary Edward R. Murrow, "There must be some 'going on.' How exactly I've never been able to decide. There is a future – that I'm sure of. But how? I don't know" (Smith, 2017, p. 187).

References

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