

SOCIETY HILL SYNAGOGUE



FROM THE DESK OF
RABBI NATHAN S. KAMESAR

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Dear Friends,

**Reb Simcha
Raphael**

Scholar-in-
Residence



I am so glad we were able to have a scholar-in-residence last Shabbat on the topic of Jewish beliefs in the afterlife. Here is what I shared on Friday night to help frame our learning:

This need sparked for me at a funeral I officiated for a congregant's elderly father a few years ago. At some point during the service, the congregant made a passing reference regarding the idea that he hoped his father was in a better place. I don't recall exactly; this wasn't the part that stuck with me.

What stuck with me was what he said to me after the service. He came up to me and apologized. He said, "I'm sorry, rabbi. I know we Jews don't believe in an afterlife. Never mind. I'm sorry I said that."

He was potentially more concerned that he had upset me theologically, than he was with his own grief. Or, who knows, perhaps this was an expression of his grief.

Either way, what concerned me most was that this congregant believed that his Judaism, his Jewish tradition, his primary vehicle of encountering topics like death, mourning, and the beyond, signaled to him that it was not appropriate, or at the very least not normative, to have beliefs about life after death. That his tradition signaled to him that that was not an option his soul could really consider.

It struck me that we stewards of Jewish tradition—modern rabbis, scholars, spiritual leaders—were doing a great disservice to our people if the message we were communicating to our people is that that understanding—the understanding that the soul survives bodily death; that the living can have impressions that their loved ones remain present in some form or other, and that we can feel their love and send them love in return; or that we can contemplate life beyond this life for ourselves—we are doing a great disservice to our people if we signal that those understandings are beyond the scope of Jewish tradition.

Let me be very clear: those understandings, succinctly stated that the soul survives bodily death, that there are Jewish beliefs regarding an afterlife, are absolutely present within mainstream Jewish thought.

That being said, I entirely understand where this congregant was coming from. When I made this declaration during a Kol Nidre sermon a couple of years ago, I got as many blank stares and confused looks as I did nods of approval, if not more so.

There are a number of reasons for this misimpression that Jews do not hold space for a belief in an afterlife.

Number one is that Jews, as distinct from other religions—particularly Christianity, against whom minority religions are often compared—have rarely been very interested in what we might call systematic theology: carefully spelled-out treatises harmonizing all the divergent views into one Orthodox set of beliefs on God or on death.

If anything, the reverse is true: Jews have been more interested in preserving a multitude of voices, a multitude of teachings on all of life's complex questions. The talmud, the primary text of rabbinic Judaism, is essentially a preservation of rabbinic debates and argumentation, oftentimes without resolution, of all areas of religion, from ritual to belief.

So to the extent you're confused about the Jewish belief on life after death, let me answer that confusion: yes. That confusion is a feature, not a bug, of Jewish

tradition. The way in which Judaism has been passed down to us is to preserve, and to extend, the conversation on all of these questions, and to preserve the multiplicity of teachings on these questions, making space for a wide variety of different beliefs.

That said, again, I want to be clear that that multiplicity of teachings very much includes, and very much does not preclude, teachings that explicitly lift up a belief in life after death.

I'll give just one example, and then more will come from our scholar tonight Reb Simcha Raphael. This one is encountered every day by traditionally observant Jews as part of our morning prayers:

*These are the matters,
the fruits of which a person enjoys in this world,
[while] the principal (an investment metaphor is used) the tree
is preserved for them in the World-to-Come.*

*Eilu divarim,
sh'adam ohel peiruteihem b'olam hazeh,
v'hakeren kaiemet l'olam habah.*

אלו דברים
שְׂאָדָם אוֹכֵל פְּרוּתֵיהֶם בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה,
וְהִקְרֵן קַיֵּמַת לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא

and then it goes on to enumerate a series of deeds which fit into this category: honoring our parents, [performing] deeds of kindness, eagerly engaging with our studies, providing hospitality to guests, visiting the sick, and more.

Now you'll note, for those of you following along, that this siddur, this prayer book used a different translation than I used: their translation says, for the same Hebrew verse:

These are the deeds that yield immediate fruit and continue to yield fruit in time to come.

I said in the World-to-Come, a special place and time beyond our understanding often associated with life beyond death. The prayerbook says in time to come; generically at some point down the line.

Now, I don't want to say their translation is wrong and my translation is right. All translation is interpretation. But... their translation is wrong and my translation is right.

Or, more accurately I should say, theirs is a translation of a siddur published in 2016, whose audience, (and in some cases, whose authors) are resistant to, are not comfortable with, suggestions about a life beyond life, about nonrationalistic, non-empirical, non-observable suggestions about the afterlife.

Why is that—why do modern Jewish perspectives shy away so strongly from what is so clearly so present throughout centuries of Jewish tradition?

Well, Reb Simcha Raphael points out a couple of reasons in his book, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*.

One reason is the relationship of Jews to Christianity.

Centuries of anti-Jewish persecution took its toll on the modern Jewish psyche. As Reb Simcha writes, “in reaction to the omnipresence of Christian teachings on heaven and hell, it seems as if, collectively, many Jews have rejected, in totality, the whole idea of a postmortem life. If the operating cultural assumption was that non-Christians could not enter heaven,” which is what many Christians taught, “then many Jews decided to completely opt out of the whole system, abandoning belief in both heaven and hell and a life after death.” Okay? The oppressive nature of how the Christian belief in heaven and hell operated in our society pushed Jews away from the conversation altogether. Which I believe is a shame, because it cut us off from our own spiritual resources of how we grieve and how we relate to our own life and death.

More tragically, another historical factor that pushed many of us from a relationship to life after death was that most devastating moment in Jewish history. The Holocaust. For many Jews, the Holocaust transformed our relationship to God and to religion. For some, like Victor Frankel, it made man's search for meaning, a search for meaning bound up in the godly and the sacred, all the more imperative. But for others it severed the connection to traditional religious perspectives, tossing out God all associated with it, including the afterlife.

To the extent there was already a trend among many Jewish people away from traditionalism and towards rationalism, and empiricism, and the sciences, and towards the observable—and there was—this trend was in some respects exacerbated by the Holocaust. Perhaps more to the point, as Raphael writes, “the Holocaust obliterated the traditional Jewish life of Eastern Europe, wiping out so many of the spiritual leaders who had direct access to Judaism's sacred legacy of

mystical teachings about the soul and its afterlife pilgrimage. In a strange way, it is almost as if both the Jewish afterlife and the spiritual worldview behind those holy teachings died in Nazi death camps.”

In some respects oppression, through Christian hegemony and through the Nazis, wore down our relationship to some of our sacred teachings.

None of this is to suggest we shouldn't ask hard questions of these sacred teachings.

None of this is to suggest we should turn away from rationalism towards dogmatic acceptance of religious prescriptions.

But nor should we cut ourselves off from engaging with these teachings. From letting them enter into our lives to open up portals of curiosity, of exploration, of following through on intuition.

Science, for all of its virtues, doesn't have much to say about the afterlife, for better or for worse. There is very little that the scientific method can say about whether we commune with our ancestors after we die; whether we reconnect with our loved ones. Science can't speak to whether or not we can palpably experience their presence here on earth. Whether living a life while formulating a relationship to the beyond has resonances here in this life.

You know what does have something to say about those questions? Judaism. Religion. As Heschel writes, “religion is not within but beyond the limits of mere reason. Its task is not to compete with reason... but to aid us where reason gives us only partial aid. [Religion, Judaism] must be understood in terms compatible with the sense of the ineffable.” With that which we can't put into words. “Frequently where concepts fail, where rational understanding ends,” that's where the meaning of religion, the meaning of Judaism begins.

Judaism does not have a monopoly on truth.

No one knows what happens to us and to our loved ones after we die. But it does have a rich array of traditions, resurrected by scholars like Reb Raphael, that give voice to our impressions, our intuitions, our experiences throughout the generations that the soul—ours and our loved ones—that something happens to it after we die. As Reb Zalman Schachter Shalomi writes, in the forward to Reb Raphael's book, “a tradition provides a person with a socially acceptable means to enter the conversation. By hearkening back to the tradition,” he says “I can go back to these intuitive feelings, the hunch that there exists an afterlife.” While Jewish tradition is as restricted by the limits of language as any other field, the

tradition it has developed over time glancingly touches on the world beyond this world, Olam Haba.

My ultimate purpose for organizing this scholar-in-residence weekend and for inviting Reb Simcha Raphael, who is not only a scholar of Jewish sacred writings on beliefs in the afterlife, but a grief counselor, someone who has spent countless hours with patients, clients who have experienced losses of all kinds, helping them journey through it—my ultimate purpose here is to open up the space for you to give voice to your own intuitions—to not feel as though your religious tradition closes off that lane to you. It very much does not. It opens up a very wide field, preserving a sense of the soul surviving, in this world and beyond. May you have the courage to explore.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi K