What does Judaism have to say about Life after Death?

Luba'vitch Hasidism

Hebrew gives us three distinct and paradoxical words for a cemetery: 1) *belt havkarot,* meaning a home for burial; 2) *belt olam,* meaning a home of eternity; and 3) *belt hachaim,* which means a home for the living. Why the need for three different words?

The way we define death stems directly from the way we define life. If life is merely about tending to the appetites of our bodies and hearts—then death, that unfathomable moment when the body turns lifeless, constitutes the tragic cessation of life. The cemetery, then, is a home for burial. A life has, sadly, reached its final chapter.

But there is another possible perspective: seeing life as a spiritual experience in addition to a physical one. If being alive is also about nurturing and nourishing our souls, our spiritual identity, our inner spark of God, then death, as irrevocable as it is, is not the interruption of life.

Tragic and horrendously painful? Absolutely yes. The end of one's existence? Absolutely not. The soul, which is an aspect of G-d, a fragment of the divine, is not subject to death. It travels from one realm of experience to another. In this perception, a cemetery is a home of eternity. The body is interred, but the soul remains eternal.

Yet there is something even greater we can achieve. If we—the children, students, friends relatives and communities left behind—use the passion and values of those no longer with us to inspire our daily lives and behavior, then the cemetery becomes a "home for the living." Our loved ones continue to exist in a very tangible way, in the earthly lives of the people touched by their love and com mitments.

Rabbi Yosef K Jacobson
Inrtnictor, Rabbinical College
C'hovevay Torah, Brooklyn

Modem Orthodox

The Bible is overwhelmingly focused on this life. Humans are commanded to live the good life, here and now, in harmony with God and Creation.

It remained for the Talmud to develop the limited references to a future life into a full-blooded statement of the immortality of the soul. The medieval Jewish tradition shifted the focus so that earthly life was viewed as fleeting years lived primarily to become worthy of the eternal blessing of *Heaven (Gan Eden).*

Modern liberal Jewish theology shifted the focus back to this life. Even Modern Orthodox figures like Joseph B. Soloveitchik stressed the centrality of this worldly life and religiosity, stating in his book *Halachic Man* that holiness means "the holiness of earthly here-and-now life."

The ironic result of this shift—intensified by the modern emphasis on biblical thought and the widespread ignorance of Talmudic and medieval sources—is that many liberal Jews have never heard any teaching about the soul, eternal life or existence beyond the grave. Often they have been taught that precisely this worldly emphasis constitutes Judaism's superiority over Christianity, which is portrayed as an otherworldly faith, anti-pleasure and anti-body.

Many liberal Jews are shocked to hear from traditional Jews that Judaism does, after all, teach immortality of the soul and offer the promise of eternal bliss with God and reunion with the beloved departed.

Practically speaking, what should a Jew believe? We should harness the blessings of modernity to keep us focused on the strand of classic Judaism that gives central importance to human life—fully embodied life. This tradition emphasizes *tikkun olam.* It follows the Talmudic dictum that a person will be judged for every (legitimate) pleasure in his life that he/she failed to enjoy. At the same time, we need to break the tyranny of materialism and allow ourselves to accept the promise of eternal spiritual life.

Can we know and describe the streets of heaven or the fires of hell? No. But we can put our trust in God that there is final justice, an ultimate balance in existence.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg
President of the Jewish Life/Steinhardt Foundation

Sephardic Orthodox

In *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of Our Fathers), Rabbi Jacob taught, "This world is like a lobby, a waiting room for the world to come." This teaching suggests that our lives here on earth are one long journey towards an ultimate destination.

Where is this "world to come," and what kind of life is lived there? On these questions, the Talmud quotes a verse from the prophet Isaiah: "No eye has seen these things, 0 God, except for you." Maimonides adds that only God—and nobody else—knows the actual grandeur, beauty and spiritual strength of this mysterious place our sages call *Olam HaBa.*

It seems somewhat peculiar that we spend our lives on a journey towards a destination that we know nothing about. Perhaps it is for this reason that the same Rabbi Jacob who taught about *Olam HaBa* was quick to remark, "One hour of good deeds in this world is more beautiful than all of life in the world to come." It is not the destination that is important, then, but how we spend our journey getting there.

What happens after we die? The answer lies in what happens while we are alive.

Rabbi Daniel Bouskila
Temple Tfrreth Israel, Los Angeles, California

Conservative

The prayer book is an excellent place to begin an examination of the variety of Jewish views about the afterlife.

Here are a few examples: Psalm 30:10 asks, "What profit is there if I go down to the pit? Can the dust give thanks to You? Can it declare Your truth?" And Psalm 115:17 answers, "The dead do not praise God; neither any that go down into silence."

In the memorial prayer, El Maleh Rahamim, we request that

God "shelter the soul under the wings of the *shekhinah,* granting it perfect repose.... May it rest in the Garden of Eden. Shelter the soul forever: may it be bound up in the bond of life; Adonai is its portion; may it rest in peace."

Just before the morning blessings, Birkhot Hashahar, we thank God for restoring our souls each day and declare, "You preserve it within me. You will take it from me but will return it to me in the future to come."

And finally, in every Amidah we praise God who is "faithful to revive the dead."

What can we learn from these often contradictory assertions? From age to age, different beliefs about the afterlife became dominant. Our prayer book, on this topic at least, is an anthology of different theologies. The variety of views found in the Siddur gives us license to believe whatever makes us feel most comfortable—and it even legitimizes "I don't know" as a valid position.

Whatever we believe about the afterlife, our loved ones and we, ourselves, will continue to live in the memories we leave behind, in the stories we pass from one generation to another, and in the wonderful tradition we have of naming children either in memory of deceased ancestors (Ashkenazi custom) or in honor of living relatives (Sefardi custom).

Rabbi Kenneth A. Stern
Park Avenue Synagogue
New York, NY

Reform

The Reform Movement has long affirmed the immortality of the soul, "grounding this belief on the divine nature of the human spirit," in the words of the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform. The 1961 edition of the *Rabbi's Manual,* published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, included the following reading from the apocryphal book *The Wisdom of Solomon:* "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no hurt shall befall them. In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died... but they are at peace and their hope is full of immortality" According to the 1999 Pittsburgh Principles, "we trust in our tradition's promise that although God created us as finite beings, the spirit within us is eternal."

For a long time, the movement rejected belief in *mechaye ha-meitim,* the reviving of the dead. *The Union Prayer Book* removed this concept from the Amidah, replacing it with a phrase from a Torah blessing: "who has implanted within us eternal life." The 1985 prayer *book Gates of Prayer* uses the phrase "who revives all things," thus portraying God as a power who imbues all things with life, but obliterating the idea of resurrection.

However, we have no evidence while we are alive as to what the soul's journey will be after death. In recent years, increasing numbers of Reform Jews have wished to embrace a variety of possibilities of what we all may look forward when we die, even as we continue to believe that the greatest contribution to the future of the soul after death is the manner in which it animated the body while in life.

Rabbi Richard Levy
Director School of Rabbinic Studies, Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles Campus

Reconstructionism

Practiced by millions, throughout thousands of years and hundreds of cultures, Judaism rarely speaks with one voice. This is especially true with high-interest, low-evidence topics like life after death. At one time or another, Jews have offered nearly every afterlife theory under the sun.

Today, the enlightenment approach is ascendant- We don't know what happens after we die, perhaps nothing. But how we're remembered, and the difference we made on Earth that reverberates across the generations, is real.

This belief is appropriately humble, yet still comforting. It forces the living to do their ethical and emotional best. It's spiritual, karmic even—we sow and others reap. And it fits in a tradition where, according to Exodus 34:7, God passes our mistakes on to those who follow us.

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The second stanza of the Amidah prayer, Gevurot, is a sacred cacophony in many synagogues, with Reconstructinists saying *mechayeh kol chai* (who enlivens all life), Reform Jews saying *mechayeh hakol* (who gives life to all) and traditional Jews *saying mechayeb metirn* (who gives life to the dead). But all regroup near the end to affirm *that God me 'mit urn 'chayeh, is* the Power behind both death and life.

Nothing is too great for the Totality of Existence. That same Creative Process that brought us into being also gave us intellect, empiricism and philosophical impulses, which may have us hedge our bets. The afterlife makes for great speculation, but what matters most is what we do in the one realm and one timeline we surely share.

Rabble-rouser Mother Jones says it well: "Pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living." And poet Mary Oliver asks the key question, as reprinted in the Reconstructionist Machzor: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb
Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Bethesda, MD

Jewish Renewal

So many accept the view that "Jews believe in life and living, the here and now. We don't focus on the afterlife."

While this perspective may accurately describe 20th century Judaism, it is not representative of the broad-range historical legacy of Judaism. Nor is it reflective of the perspective of Jewish Renewal, which integrates mystical Judaism into contemporary Jewish practice.

In the pre-modern Jewish world—the world of Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Hasidic and Kabbalistic masters, and even -the -Rabbis of the Mishna and Talmud—never is there any doubt about the survival of the soul and of consciousness after death. Between the world of the living and the world of the dead is a window, not a wall.

Jewish Renewal recognizes that the soul passes through a journey of completion and purification after the death of the physical body. According to the sources, this is a four-fold journey.

It is understood that immediately after death there is a period of *transition—Hibbut HaKever,* "the pangs of the grave"—as the soul leaves go of its attachment to the physical body. According to the Zohar, "For seven days the soul *[nefesh]* goes to and fro from his house to his grave from his grave to his house, mourning

for the body..." Interestingly, this corresponds with the Shiva period, suggesting a time of transition for both the departed and the bereaved.

Next, Rabbinic and Kabbalistic sources speak of a (maximum) 12-month process called Gehenna, purgation. "In Gehenna," explains the Zohar, "there are certain places [where] souls that have been polluted by the filth of this world.., are purified by fire and made white, and then they ascend towards the heavenly regions." In Jewish renewal, consonant with the mystics of old, Gehenna is not a geographical place as much as a state of consciousness in which the soul of the deceased wrestles with unresolved guilt, grief and other incomplete emotions of the life just lived. The period of daily Kaddish, corresponding with this stage, is likewise a process of completion, clearing up the unresolved for both the bereaved and the soul of the deceased.

The third stage of the post-mortem journey is referred to as Gan Eden. It is said thatafter purgation of Gehennna, the soul takes repose in the heavenly Garden of Eden. This is a time of spiritual reflection, where souls commune with like-minded souls. For the Rabbis, Can Eden was a paradise of perpetual study of Torah. In contemporary terms, it is a harvesting of the accrued spirituality of one's lifetime.

There are seven realms of Can Eden, experienced according to the level of spiritual development achieved by an individual. According to traditional belief, the act of the bereaved saying Kaddish at the time of Yahrzeit helps the soul ascend higher in Can Eden.

Finally, traditional sources suggest that a soul returns to *Tzror Ha-Hayyim---"source* of life" or "bond of *life"—a* realm of unification with the godhead, said to be under the Throne of God.

Jewish renewal also accepts the notion of reincarnation of souls. Hence, it might be said that the soul returns to Tzror Ha-Hayyixn, the Source of Life, in order to receive its calling for another incarnation *[gilgul].*

The reintegration of these traditional ideas of a post mortem journey and reincarnation into contemporary Jewish practice can transform Jewish notions of living and dying.

Simcha Raphael
Rabbinic Pastor and Professor of Religion at La Salle University

Humanistic Judaism

Judaism, in its origins, makes clearreferences to burial customs and mournin$_g$ practices, includin$_g$ the purchase of $_{gr}$aves and the tearin$_g$ of one's $_g$arment, but the biblical text is conspicuously reticent about discussing what. happens next. There are references to *sheol—*. a kind of oblivion in the dust for both the righteous and the sinner—but the Bible's virtual silence on the matter suggests a finality to life.

Apparently this message was too harsh for most people, and the cruelty of injustice whereby good people suffered and the wicked prospered was too disheartening. And so evolved the notion of a world-to-come, an *Olam Haba,* a compensation for the righteous who suffered on earth that would include ultimate resurrection. The wicked, of course, would be relegated to a place of punishment, a hell or Gehenna where their souls would be purged before being finally reprieved.

But it is questionable how many modern Jews—of all our denominations-really give much thought to this elaborate construction, not to mention derive any comfort from it. For Humanistic Jews, who, by disposition, depend on empirical reality for truth, all we know is this world and this life. We make no bets on an unknown future.

We may not believe in an afterlife, but we can gain a kind of immortality through our deeds and our accomplishments, the institutions that we build, the charities that we endow, the families we nurture, and the lasting memories that endure in the minds of those who will survive us. We live on through those who have internalized our teachings and carry on our work, even if the source of those teachings is forgotten.

Finally, the matter of life after death does not just apply to the question of the deceased. It also has to do with how one returns to life after suffering the death of a loved one. This, perhaps, is the noblest teaching that Judaism has to offer. It teaches us that there is a time to mourn and a time to renew one's commitment to living. It teaches us not to don the sackcloth of grief as a permanent garment but, in time, to cast it off.

Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer
President, Association of Humanistic Rabbis, New York

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