

Foreword to the Third Edition

I grew up in a Jewish world in which the dead retained a very important place. My maternal grandmother, the dominant Jewish influence of my childhood, was an immigrant from northeast Poland, where she had been born in 1885. She was raised in a pious home that had barely been touched by the advent of modernity. While only partially observant by the time I knew her, she retained many of the beliefs, fears, and superstitions with which she had been raised, particularly around issues of dying and the dead. In an essay I wrote a number of years ago on Eastern European Jewish piety, I suggested that men and women had differing arenas in which their pious concerns were given expression. Men's religion was conducted primarily in the public sphere of the synagogue and the house of study. Women's piety, more private, was dominant in the kitchen, the bedroom, and the cemetery. In this last matter, I particularly had this grandmother in mind.

My mother died of cancer in 1952, when I was eleven years old. Her only brother died two years after her. That left my grandparents quite devastated, losing two of their four children in their forties, one right after the other. But my grandmother was especially distraught because she had lost her *kaddishl*, the son who was supposed to recite the mourner's *kaddish* after her own death. What would become of her? How would her soul fare in the next world? Everyone knew that the more *kaddeshim* you had said for you, the higher your soul would fly—or so she had been taught. That was why so many were added to the end of each service, following each psalm recited—to give the dead an extra push, as it were. And now she was threatened to have none at all, no living offspring (daughters just did not count!) to help her on her way.

It would have been possible, of course, to hire someone to say *kaddish* for her. I recall calendars from a *Chevrab Mishnayos* somewhere that advertised the possibility of such an arrangement. Here, as a picture indicated, the *kaddish*-sayers were bearded sages, surely people with the extra merit to have their prayers heard. But, instead of

these, my grandmother turned toward me, the grandson with a special interest in things Jewish, as her best candidate. At the very end of her life (she died in 1971, shortly after I was married), she even tried to bribe me with her diamond ring as a gift for my wife, in exchange for assurance that I would say *kaddish* after her.

But I had been “prepped” for that role much earlier. From the time my mother died, I was required to visit the cemetery with her at least three times a year, during the month of Elul and on my mother’s *yahrzeit* and birthday. (The birthday visit may have been an American innovation.) Those visits would require the recital of an *El Malei Rachamim* (“O God, full of mercy!”), also said to be good for the soul of the departed. Once she saw that I knew how to say it properly, she wanted me to add another for my uncle, and then for other relatives who increasingly inhabited the extended family plot. Those cemetery visits alternated with *Yizkor* services four times each year at my grandparents’ *shul*, where we were always careful to arrive early and stay for the entire service, unlike those people (younger women, mostly) who rushed in just for *Yizkor* itself and then went “back to business,” a practice of which she heartily disapproved.

Because I come from that world, I can tell you a good deal about what happens on this side of the great curtain after a loved one passes from the world. But alas, even though I have now passed what our sages designated as the age for acquiring wisdom, I can still tell you nothing about what happens on the other. For me, the great spiritual challenge remains focused where it always has been: “Is there—or will there be—life *before* death?” I have always especially loved the *Zohar*’s reading of *Olam Ha-Ba* (“the World to Come”) as a this-worldly realm that is always just ahead of us, around the corner. Even my favorite among the early Hasidic authors, R. Nahum of Chernobyl, tells his reader each time he speaks of *Olam Ha-Ba* that he is referring to the possibility of tasting the pleasures of eternity while yet in this mortal existence, what our teacher Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi used to call “heavenly days right here on earth.”

But if I cannot tell you anything about the afterlife, surely Simcha Raphael can. He is a scholar who has devoted his entire career to researching and teaching around questions of Jewish beliefs concerning life after death. He has published two prior editions of the present work, the first of them way back in 1994, with a foreword by Reb Zalman, who had originally directed (yes, more than “encouraged”) Raphael to write on this subject, one too unknown to the American-educated Jewish public. Those editions, along with a host of articles, papers, and seminars by Raphael, have very much increased that knowledge. I am very much honored to stand alongside Reb Zalman in commending Raphael’s work to your attention.

In this newly augmented third edition, Raphael has added new material on *gilgul*, or reincarnation, in kabbalistic thought, a topic in which there is increased interest in recent years, partly because of the exposure of many Westerners to similar ideas in Eastern religions. He has also added a chapter on the afterlife as discussed in Yiddish literature, where many of the folk-beliefs with which I started are given center stage. Read them and learn!

I write these words neither as a believer nor as a cynic. Early in my adult life, I found that acceptance of the finality of death was important to my own psychic survival. I thus had to declare myself agnostic with regard to all that I had been taught or had heard regarding the afterlife. But as I became older, lost people I loved, and perhaps became just a tad wiser, I learned that the “after” in “afterlife” existed in a realm quite beyond time, and that when speaking of souls, we were dwelling in a dimension in which distinctions belonging to the rational intellect, including “present” versus “absent,” “here” versus “there,” and “before” versus “after” did not apply. Agnostic I remain, but more humbly so. I have begun to learn how much there is that I do not know.

Some of it, however, you may learn from reading, and contemplating, the book before you.

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