

# Jewish Views of the Afterlife

Third Edition

Simcha Paull Raphael

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# Foreword to the First Edition

## A PERSONAL MEMORY

The topic of this book, the fate of the soul after death, as seen in the source texts of Jewish tradition, has deeply concerned me ever since I awakened to my own thinking.

In 1939 I was fourteen and a half, and we were refugees in Belgium. Hitler had just taken over Austria, where I grew up. I felt as if all of my roots were cut from under me. The specter of not being left to live out all my allotted years because of Hitler was in the foreground of my mind. I was angry with God. I wanted to have some people in God's place so I could vent my frustration and anger on them. One Shabbat afternoon I decided to visit an Orthodox youth fellowship, Pirchei Agudat Yisrael, where I could count on them to study a text of the Mishnah, *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers.

The lesson always begins with "All of Israel has a share in the World-to-Come." I think to myself: "Oy, will I give it to them!" I go there prepared with all of my ammunition and sure enough, sitting opposite me at the head of the table is a young man, with a Talmud folio before him; he begins to read this Mishnah. Before long, after he translates the first part, I jump into the conversation and I put out all of my denial: "The World-to-Come! Pie in the sky! Nobody has ever come back from there! Baloney! Opiate of the masses! This is only to enslave and deceive people! You rob them in this world but promise that they'll get something in the next world." And as I start to pour my pent-up anger, the people around the table are getting furious, ready to tear me apart. But the signal from their leader at the head of the table is to stay calm and let me finish.

When I finish, he says to me, "Would you like to hear from someone who agrees with you?" I say, "Sure enough!" At this point, I can't back out of it. He begins to

read for me Maimonides' Mishnah commentary on the section he has just read, which deals with the issue of the afterlife. Maimonides debunks the popular gross ideas of the folktales arising from a naive understanding of Torah and Talmud, and then proceeds to refine them to a most sophisticated subtlety.

Hearing this reading touched me in a deep way, and at that moment I began to make my deep commitment to Judaism. I now had a sense that there exists this spirituality beyond what I saw as the fairy-tale language used in the Talmud. And with the debunking there came the affirmation that there really was something there. But this something that was there was much more subtle and much more spiritual than what I had heard up to that time. With this affirmation, the issues about God and soul took on greater clarity for me.

## THE AUTHOR

I am delighted that this work, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, is now being published. On the very first day I met Simcha Raphael, in 1976, we had a conversation about life after death in Jewish tradition. As I see it, the unfolding of his own life destiny is expressed in the writing of this book. His life pursuits and studies have equipped him with the critical capacity of academic scholarship, with the vision of a mystic and the insight of a transpersonal psychologist. All of this he has used in his pastoral counseling with the dying and bereaved, and the wisdom of his experience in doing this holy work suffuses the spirit of this work.

*Jewish Views of the Afterlife* is reflective of the new genre of Jewish-renewal literature. It is an amalgam of the emerging cosmology with the metaphysics of Jewish mysticism. Simcha Raphael, who has participated in the evolution of Jewish renewal, brings forward valuable ancient traditions and makes them available and accessible in content and in spirit to the concerned citizens of the next millennium.

## THIS IS AN IMPORTANT BOOK

There are those who have written about these "last" and ultimate things as if they did not apply to them. Books like these can be written "objectively," academically, by doing *conceptual* thinking. However, it makes a great deal of difference if one approaches a subject in what Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel used to call the method of *situational* thinking. This is a book that, with all of the conceptual material it contains, is nonetheless anchored in an awareness of our existential situation.

We are dealing here with material that seems to scandalize the rational, everyday mind. If it were not described by those seers endowed with a "fantastic" vision, we would not be able to approach this issue at all. We cannot and must not approach this subject with the attitude of nineteenth-century scientism, asking, "Who has ever come back from there?" This is not material that has hard, laboratory-repeatable,

empirical data behind it. But given that one looks at the *prima facie* anecdotal reports on our own and other traditions, one meets countless reports that rivet one's attention and demand that one look into them for the paramount patterns they share.

There are people who have been researching in what we may call borderline sciences, studying psychic phenomena, parapsychology and the near-death and out-of-body experiences. Often, in their studies, they quote Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist texts and compare them with the reported phenomena. Whenever I as a Jew read that material, I felt that tradition, and the teachings I received about the afterlife were confirmed by these outside sources. And yet I also experienced a very deep frustration and regret that our Jewish sources were not part and parcel of their conversations.

In the 1950s, when I was searching for this type of information for myself, I began by looking in the library's subject catalog. I got to know names of authors who had written about postmortem survival. One day, I ventured into the stacks and discovered an entire section in the Dewey Decimal system filed under number 133. I still remember it well! There facing me on the library shelves—far beyond anything I ever imagined—were all kinds of studies of what the philosophers and the religious writers had to say about the world beyond death.

To my delight, one day I discovered thirty volumes of *Arcana Celestia*, written by the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, and I opened one to see what was inside. How surprised I was to see an amazing Midrash on the Torah interspersed with observations that Swedenborg, trained as a scientist, made when in one of his altered states. He was able to visit realms that compare with our *m'tivta d'r'qia'*, the Academy on High. Swedenborg knew these worlds as the realms of good and of truth. In the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah, one would speak of similar worlds described by Swedenborg—the worlds of Yetzirah, and of Briyah, and the Gan Eden below and the Gan Eden above. Here I had found Jewish Kabbalah, in a different cultural garb.

To my surprise, another author I found was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He had been for me just the creator of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries until I discovered, also in those 133 stacks, how he and Sir Oliver Crookes had worked together in the British Societies for Psychical Research, applying their intellectual acumen to the question “What happens to us after we die?” The Societies for Psychical Research, in this country and in England, produced many works concerning communing with the departed, mediumship and other psychic phenomena, and studies of the near-death experience and life after death. It became very clear to me that the literature on this subject was enormous.

About the time I was reading about the afterlife, I also started to pay attention to spiritualism. I visited people working as mediums and settings in which spirits of the dead purportedly came through. I discovered that these kinds of encounters brought about a deeply surprising experience of authentic and truthful material being communicated. This also gave me an understanding of what I read in the writings of the psychic Edgar Cayce, and in the kabbalistic text *Shaar Ha-Gilgulim*, a medieval text on the reincarnation of souls.

And yet, as I read through all these kinds of studies, I realized that what we Jews had to say about such topics never entered into the discourse. It was no wonder! The first translations of Jewish classics from the Hebrew were done by rationalists. They were ashamed to make available texts that would expose the kinds of mystical writings that the Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz rejected as irrational superstition. They did not translate works dealing with otherworldly matters such as soul and afterlife, so these sources did not get to be known in German or English translations. Sure enough, the Yiddish author Y. L. Peretz could tell stories about *Yenne Velt*—“the other world”—but that was safe enough for translation since it was seen as folklore. As long as it did not philosophically contradict the *Religion der Vernunft*—“Religion of Reason”—as Judaism was understood to be, the rationalists felt safe. In this way, our teachings on the afterlife remained unknown to the world at large. For many Jews, the thirst for knowing something about our teachings regarding the mystical journey of the soul was not quenched.

For me personally, the matter became crucial about 1950 when the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yossef Yitzchak Schneersohn, passed on. Suddenly, without access to the master’s guidance, we were bereft. I often pondered, how can I contact the Rebbe? At one point, I even offered his son-in-law and successor to train as a medium so that the *hasidim* would be able to consult the late Rebbe and continue to receive his guidance. In the first year after his father-in-law’s demise, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, *z’l*, insisted that he was not the Rebbe but that he was merely the chief of operations for the late Rebbe. “The Rebbe, Rabbi Yossef Yitzchak, is the leader of the generation. What difference does it make if he is in this world or the other world?” was how he put it.

“Medium?” he said. “If the Rebbe wants to come through, he’ll find his ways to come through. We don’t have to provide jumping tables. Let him go direct to each individual *hasid* in visions, apparitions, or dreams. The Rebbe knows how to move around the narrow limits.” And, in truth, for a while, I received his guidance in dreams. In this way, my concerns about and interests in the issue of the afterlife were sharpened by the loss of my master’s physical guidance and reinforced by the dream apparitions. As a result of these experiences, I began to look at the classical doctrines on postmortem survival with a fresh eye.

## DOCTRINE AND EXPERIENCE

Classical Jewish belief is very clear: there is this world, *Olam Ha-Zeh*, and there is the World to Come, *Olam Ha-Ba*. At birth the soul enters the body and at death leaves it and continues to survive. This belief is referred to in Jewish sources as *hash’arat ha-nefesh*—literally “the survival of the soul.” There is judgment and reward and punishment in the afterlife. According to the *Ethics of the Fathers*, we are to give our report or reckoning, our *din va-heshbon*, before God for a lifetime lived, and expect that

we would be judged by God after death. Additionally, there is Gan Eden—paradise, and Gehinnom—purgatory. All of these beliefs are articles of faith in the Orthodox world, where they are read about in traditional sources and taken seriously. However, for most people these worlds beyond death are seen as some supernal reality that is not directly accessible to human experience within this world. There is an unbridgeable reality gap between what is believed, because one has to believe it, and what one actually experiences.

Even among those who, as a matter of doctrine, affirm a belief in divine postmortem reward and retribution, there is very little awareness of the specific teachings found in the tradition. If you were to say, “Do I have to believe that?” people would say, “Yes, that’s what you have to believe.” If I were to retort, “Can you show me where in Jewish literature such teachings can be found?” only a few could cite chapter and verse. They will affirm existence of a life after death as a part of their creedal commitments, their *ani ma’amin*, but believe that it is a reality of another kind, not accessible to us here.

It is this type of thinking that divides the *mitnagged* from the *hasid*, the rationalist from the mystic. For the mystically inclined, the underlying question is always, when I perform a commandment, does it have a certain psychospiritual effect on my connection with God? How does the fulfillment of a commandment impact upon my being, my soul, my consciousness? For the rationally thinking *mitnagged*, on the other hand, there is an unbridgeable chasm between the transcendent reality and personal human experience. In other words, it doesn’t matter if one has a direct experience of some deeper level of consciousness. What is important to the rationalist is that God’s will is fulfilled on this plane. There is no notion about what a *mitzvah*, or commandment, is beyond that. Clearly, this dividing line between two types of mind, rationalist and mystic, affects the way people think about the questions explored in this book.

As you read, you will discover just how much mystical literature is available and how, over the course of millennia, Judaism has traditionally accepted the existence of an ontological or ultimate reality in the life after death. Only in the last one hundred years has the rationalist mind-set hidden this mystical point of view in the closet.

As human beings, we have deep hunches about the afterlife. But there has been much denial about death in general and about one’s own mortality. The reason this conversation does not come out of the closet is that although we have deep hunches about it, we do not have socially acceptable means to talk about it. A tradition provides a person with a socially acceptable means to enter the conversation. By hearkening back to the tradition, I can go back to these intuitive feelings, the hunch that there exists an afterlife. To find this conversation written about, and taken seriously, is of great support to people who have had their insights and intuitions confirmed in a social way. This book thus becomes an invitation to this conversation, and its publication at this point is timely and much needed.

## A MEDITATION ON THE EVOLUTION OF IDEAS AND SOULS

What I have learned in my encounter with the question about life after death leads me to the following meditation. The early parts of the Bible know not of an afterlife above or in heaven. There is a region known as Sheol, the netherworld—Hades. In that region all souls, righteous and wicked, abide (including the patriarch Jacob, who says that he shall surely “go down to Sheol” and Samuel, the prophet, who is raised from Sheol by the Medium of Ein Dor). Scripturally, the dead sleep in the dust and await the time they will be raised from their graves.

Apparently, at that time there had not yet taken hold a belief in a heavenly afterlife in which the blessed and vindicated souls abide. We find in the “intertestamental period” the extracanonical texts of the Apocrypha, and in them there are already other beliefs about the afterlife that in the talmudic period become distinct visions of heavens and hells. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, especially after the publication of the *Zohar*, there are complete geographies of the seven levels of Gehinnom and the many mansions of the heavens. Around this time, teachings on reincarnation make their appearance after having been denied in earlier times. What is one to believe today, in the welter of seemingly conflicting notions of afterlife found throughout history? Are these beliefs really in conflict, each one contradicting the other? Or perhaps they are philosophical ideas that reflect various stages in the evolution of both the ideas of soul and the soul matter of the world?

As I started looking through history I saw a growth in the history of ideas. In my meditations I often contemplate the cycles, the patterns, as they unfold. Patterns, rather than specific details, give us the deeper insights. For me, the deepest midrashic process is to discover patterns that are embedded in the ancient texts. As we wrestle with the meaning of these texts, they begin to issue forth new insights and patterns that we then apply to our readings of other texts.

When I bring together what I have learned from the study of psychology, and from my own introspection, I discover the existence of similar developmental patterns. I frequently ask myself if the development of the stages of the afterlife only deals with ideas or if there is a deeper pattern that reflects the evolution of the soul itself. I see in the variety of teachings on the afterlife a parallel to the long evolutionary process in which consciousness arises from single cells, to sexual reproduction in animals, and at last reaches that of human beings. After many millennia of evolution, human souls emerge out of, and at death return to, a primordial pool. Thus, for instance, in Judges 2:10 we find the statement that “an entire generation was gathered into its ancestors.” As a soul discarnate, one returns to the “ancestors” after a lifetime. This is to be taken as an ontological reality and not as a mere figure of speech.

Through the process of evolution, more and more consciousness emerges with each life cycle. The experience of each lifetime creates a deeper and stronger imprint of specific personality molded on the spiritual substance of the individual soul. Through her evolving biology, the earth has produced the now-enhanced matrix of the human soul. That soul matrix proceeded so far that it now reached that level

where it could even think about the process of thought, thus reaching the sophistication in which it would turn its thought to the meaning of life and to what happens after death.

With the close of the biblical period, we are talking about judgment before God, purgatory, and a heavenly life after death. But at that time and at that level of evolution, we see only one individual life cycle. Then centuries later there is the introduction of the possibility of multiple life-times, many cycles. Notions of reincarnation appear in religious texts all over the world. So too people report “*déjà vu*” phenomena and relate their experiences of recalling past lives. These testimonies enter the stream of popular culture, again suggesting that the ontological reality of people’s lives, as well as the inner consciousness, reflects what is found in the text, and vice versa.

As you read this book you will do well to remember that the various statements about the fate of the soul after death not only represent ideas found in texts but also describe phases in the long journey of the soul’s evolution.

## AFTER-DEATH CARE

Another important consideration this book raises is, How are we to help those who die and those who have died? I think often about those dying now who are making their way through to the other side and the problems they are likely to encounter. I pray that they are getting help from those who come to meet them on the other side.

From Jewish texts, we know of states of the after-death experience in which the soul is disoriented and confused. Our sources speak of *Hibbut Ha-Kever*, the pangs of the grave, and *Olam Ha-Tohu*, the world of confusion. How do we understand the reality of these states for people who are now dying or who are recently deceased? Are there any traditional models of care for the souls of the dead? From the legacy of Hasidism, we know that the Baal Shem Tov used to talk about *Tikkun Ha-Neshamot*, “the fixing or mending of souls.” Before Shabbat he would help all of those souls that had passed during the week to make their reconciled entry into the world beyond. It was known that on Friday afternoons, he would say a long *Minbah Amidah*, afternoon silent prayer, and using deeply concentrated prayer, would act as a guide on behalf of the souls of the dead. Similarly, in the premodern Jewish world there were lay societies—the *Hevrah Tehillim* and *Hevrah Mishnayot*—who took upon themselves to provide after-death care by reciting Psalms, the *Kaddish* prayer, and selected texts of the Mishnah.

Even now in this age of the epidemics of cancer, AIDS, and other ravaging diseases, we need adepts to do this type of sacred rescue work. Members of the Jewish burial society, the *Hevrah Kaddisha*, could learn to offer such help to those who have died; ideally, each *Hevrah Kaddisha* group could have its own set of hospice workers to help people make the transition from life to what lies beyond. These and other possibilities are a natural outgrowth of the research on Jewish ideas of the hereafter



gathered together in this book. With a deeper knowledge of Judaism's afterlife traditions, individuals and communities can be more adequately equipped and motivated to create cooperative institutions dedicated to postmortem care of the soul.

## THE RESURRECTION

Finally, in reflecting on ideas about the afterlife, I turn to the question of the meaning of *Tehiyyat Ha-Metim*, resurrection of the dead. Each day I recite several times the traditional Jewish formula "Blessed are You who revives the dead." In what way can one affirm this ancient principle of the faith the Sages and Maimonides teach as an essential component to being a believing Jew?

I do not believe that the crypts will open up in cemeteries and corpses will crawl out of them. Do I believe that at some time at the end of days the individual cells of my remains will be reconstituted? How many bodies have I worn out in only one lifetime already? We keep on changing. I cannot claim that this body will rise at the time of the resurrection. Which one of my various bodies, from which incarnation, which time in history? So I ask myself, how can I say I believe in the resurrection of the dead and mean it?

I believe that the resurrection occurs when dead matter proceeds to become a conscious, living being. This resurrection seems to be happening to the totality of this planet right now, at this very moment. On the cusp of the twenty-first century, this planet is waking up, being raised from being merely dead matter to becoming aware, conscious, alive. In paying attention to the emerging conscious ecology, we are part of this miraculous process of the rising from the dead. As human beings, we are becoming part of the planet's consciousness. In the language of the Lovelock-Margolis "Gaia hypothesis," we serve as the cells of the global brain. We are hearing the message of the planet earth, saying to us: "You can no longer do what you are doing to me. You have to change your ways. You have to collaborate with me." As we begin to awaken and hear this message, we begin to collaborate with earth's awakening and healing!

I believe *Tehiyyat Ha-Metim* is the resurrection of matter. In the past we used to think of matter dead and unconscious. Today, in this age of nuclear technology, genetic engineering, and supercomputers, matter is becoming alive to us! We speak of atoms, molecules, and cells as strings of information. Biologists have discovered genetic consciousness as encoded in DNA and RNA. With the advent of the computer, we now think of the memory as resident in silicon, a stone chip. Our thinking about matter and the physical world has undergone a shift from death to life.

*Tehiyyat Ha-Metim*, the resurrection of the dead, can then mean the coming to total awareness of the planet as a living organism with which we are connected. As beings in connection with the holographic planet mind, we will be augmented in consciousness and enriched by all other conscious beings!

This meditation on the evolution of the soul follows the way of the evolution. In this flow of thought, the disparate statements regarding the fate of the soul become of one piece. We meet the treasured pearls not separately but as part of a whole string, one in succeeding connection with the other. The teachings of Jewish tradition on the soul and its afterlife destiny can in this way be seen in a unified field theory, as a part of the greater whole.

Mazel Tov to us that this book is being made available as an aid in this process.

Zalman M. Schachter-Shalomi  
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