



Book Review *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, by Simcha Paull Raphael. Jason Aronson, 475 pp., 1994; 1996 (Softcover). *Journal of Psychology and Judaism*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Winter 2000 (© 2001), pp.287-288

Jewish Views of the Afterlife fills a void which has existed for at least two hundred years. Dr. Raphael, who is both a psychologist and rabbi, begins with his own quandary about Judaism's answer to the problem of death. Faced with several shattering deaths in his own life, Dr. Raphael turned to Judaism for solace. Though it was rich in ritual, it seemed to be lacking any clear-cut philosophy. The ultimate question about the place of death within a Jewish philosophy of life seemed deficient without a theory of the afterlife. Encouraged by Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, Dr. Raphael embarked on a search of the Jewish literature on | life after death.

His findings form the bulk of this invaluable book. Using biblical, Rabbinic and Kabbalistic sources, he traces the development of Jewish beliefs about the afterlife. This evolutionary sequence shows how Jews gradually developed the concepts of the survival of the individual soul, Heaven (Gan Eden), Hell (Gehenna), resurrection and reincarnation.

This is not to say that all Jews believe in all of these concepts. Rather he finds Jewish sources to match to contributions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Transpersonal psychology. Most of his sources existed only in Hebrew, untranslated by scholars who were embarrassed to translate esoteric texts once rationalism and materialism became the predominant modes of thought in both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. Thus, until the publication of this book, little was known about Jewish corollaries to the Eastern philosophies of life after death.

Though the scholarly historical exploration may be a bit too detailed for some readers, it is a fascinating compendium of ancient speculation and belief on the problem of death. Particularly enlightening are the stories. For example, the story of the death of the Baal Shem Tov, with full consciousness, dignity, and

metaphysical evidence of survival was heart rending. In reading this portion to a small workshop group, I encountered complete silence which seemed reverential. Many of the people were near tears. Perhaps stories like this one strike a chord of truth within our souls. Perhaps such stories remind us of who we really are.

Perhaps the most useful and enlightening chapter is his “contemporary psychological model of the afterlife.” Using Jewish, Buddhist, and Near-death experiences as sources, Raphael develops a coherent and easily understandable model of what may happen to the soul after death. The model traces the after-death journey from an initial confusion, through feelings of love, peace and light, a life review, a period of cleansing (“Like a year of intensive psychotherapy”), a heavenly repose, and a preview of the next life prior to reincarnation. The details of all these stages are fascinating reading for both the believer and the doubter in an afterlife.

I believe the book would be interesting to a wide variety of people but perhaps would be of most value to the recently bereaved. I found it of great use and comfort in facing the recent death of my own father. Raphael connects ritual to this belief system in many fascinating ways. For example, the mourners kaddish may be helpful to the departed soul as well as to the mourner. The disembodied spirit may use the prayers as a form of strength to do what must be done after death.

Having given several talks on this topic in the past year, I have found a keen interest in the ideas presented in this book. It should be in the library of every synagogue as a reference, as well as in the individual libraries of Jews and non-Jews alike.

Finally, this book may serve as an inspiration toward becoming more loving and cooperative with each other. If we truly do face all of our unresolved problems in the afterlife, we may as well decide to lead more meaningful, loving lives now.

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