

Judaism, the Kabbalah, and the Afterlife

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Judaism

In the early Biblical period (Abraham to the exodus; 1800 - 1250 B.C.) death was considered to be a return to the company of a deceased family in the family tomb. The belief was that the living would sustain the dead, and the dead would protect the living.

In the pre-exilic Biblical period (Joshua to Babylonian exile; 1250 - 586 B.C.), it was now believed that the graves of the family, tribe and nation united into an underground place (a subterranean region) known as *Sheol*. In Sheol, the beings existed in a faded and weakened condition. They were known as *rephaim* (shades, ghosts, powerless ones, weak ones). Sheol was neither good nor bad and God was the personal God of the Israelites. It was thought that God dwelt in the heavens, humans dwelt in the Earth, and the dead dwelt in Sheol, and God had no control over Sheol. The *rephaim* in Sheol had the power to be aware of the Earthly realm and interact with humans.

In the post-exilic Biblical period (Babylon exile to the Hellenistic era; 586 - 200 B.C.), Sheol becomes a temporary stop-off place. God now became the God of the entire universe and was in control of everything including Sheol. The deceased in Sheol could no longer interact with humans. Sheol also became a destiny for the enemies of Israel. However, Sheol became a temporary stop-off place for the righteous who could interact with God after death. When the messiah came, the righteous deceased would be resurrected from the dead (along with their bodies) and enjoy the wonderful messianic kingdom.

In the apocryphal period (writings not included in the Hebrew Bible; 200 B.C. - 200 A.D.), the collected texts are known as the *Apocrypha*

and the *Pseudepigrapha*. Fifteen of the apocryphal texts and none of the *Pseudepigrapha* texts are included in the Catholic Bible. In this period, the belief emerged of an individual soul separate from the body. Each person's soul represented a piece of God. The belief first mentioned in the Bible's Book of Daniel that there will be separate fates for moral and evil people was now emphasized. Sheol was now described as an assembly place for the deceased souls who wait for the judgment time. *Gehenna* now was used as a synonym for Sheol, and both terms represented the equivalent of hell.

Heaven appeared with various angels who interact with humans. First there was one heaven, then four, and next seven. The third heaven included hell and paradise. Finally, for the righteous souls, the Garden of Eden (*Gan Eden*) emerged where the *Shekhinah* (feminine aspect of God) shone brightly. The wicked souls went to Sheol (*Gehenna*) for punishment. The righteous souls went to heaven (paradise, *Gan Eden*); and a third category, the intermediate or partially defiled souls went through post-mortem purification and then could continue on to heaven.

The belief also arose that immediately following the soul's emergence from the dead body, seven days would pass during which the soul reviewed and considered its various possible postmortem options. Then the individual souls, dependent upon their merit, were either assigned to abodes reserved for the wicked or the righteous. Each abode had seven realms. The souls remained there until the end-of-days when the ultimate resurrection and final destination occurred.

In the rabbinic period (the time of the *Talmud* and the *Midrash*; 70 - 800 A.D.) new concepts emerged. The writings during this period were

based on interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, and additional legalistic and moralistic literature. The writings were known as the Talmud (composed of the *Mishnah* and the *Gemard*) and the Midrash (primarily a compilation of interpretations of the Hebrew Bible).

The basic concept was the way a person served God and fulfilled the commandments while alive determined the individual's fate in the afterlife. Most of the rabbis stressed an immediate afterlife, but there was disagreement at the time of the resurrection on whether the soul alone will be judged or whether the body and soul would be judged together.

During the immediate afterlife, some rabbis discussed the two main ways the soul leaves the body. A righteous individual would have the soul depart similarly to drawing hair out of milk, while an evil person would have the soul depart similarly to pull a tangled rope out of a narrow opening. Interestingly, at the 1999 Annual Conference of The Academy of Religion and Psychological Research, Dr. Joanne McMahon showed that when people die fearfully and angrily, rigor mortis (occurs two to six hours after death) comes on sooner and is much stronger than when they don't die fearfully and angrily.

Cadaveric spasm (begins immediately after death) is brought on by great psychological anxiety or tension and has been observed in some suicidal deaths. It doesn't occur with those who die peacefully. Could it be that not only people. But people who die with anger or fear also have their soul depart with a great deal of resistance?

Two other phenomena that have been observed by some NDErs are: hearing a noise as the soul departs from the body; and having a life review after the soul departs the body. Some rabbis claim that a noise is supposed to occur as the soul departs and that a life review occurs, which determines the soul's eventual fate.

During this time period, the Angel of Death (malakh hamavett) first appeared. Accompanying the Angel of Death was a colleague

of his named Dwnah, who was the caretaker of the souls of the departed. It was believed that even in the grave, the soul could still feel pain and communicate with both living and heavenly realms.

Immediately after death, both body and soul went through a process of physical torment. Many rabbis believed that during the first three days after death, the soul remained close to the body. Other rabbis believed the time period was seven days. Gehenna (or *Gehinnori*) replaced Sheol as a place for the wicked and was equivalent to hell. Righteous souls would then travel to Gan Eden and enjoy themselves until the end-of-days resurrection and judgment when they could return to Gan Eden.

Another new concept was that the evil souls would remain in Gehenna for a maximum period of twelve months. However, certain evil-doers who showed no sign of repentance could stay there forever.

Here, for the first time, the Midrash described a place in the highest region of Gan Eden where the souls of the righteous gather. It was known as divine treasury (*otzar*). Somewhat related to *otzar* was a holding place for souls in the highest spheres of Gan Eden. It was known as *tzor hahayyim* (treasury of life, bundle of life, bond of life). The *Midrash* also described a storehouse of souls where the souls stay prior to being physically embodied. This storehouse was known as *guf* (body).

It was generally believed that the end-of-days resurrection would take place in Israel. That meant that the deceased bodies (or remaining parts of the bodies) had to be transported to Israel for burial. However, sometimes this was impossible. So, the rabbis stated that God would build underground passages. This would allow them to be buried away from Israel or if no body was found, still allow them to reach Israel.

To summarize, the consensus was that, upon death, the body and soul would undergo a period of physical torment. Then the soul would go to Gehenna for twelve months where purgation of sins and purification would take place.

All the souls, except those who couldn't repent, would travel to Gan Eden, where a blissful existence would take place until the end-of-days resurrection.

In the medieval period (the time of the luminous and dark souls; 850 - 1450 A.D.) the major Judaic principles were formulated that hold true at the present. The rabbinical concept of physical torment of the body and soul was elaborated upon and was known as the judgment of the grave (*din-ha-kever*). Various types of punishment occurred, which were known as the pangs of the grave (*Hibbut-Ha-Kever*). The severity of the punishment depended upon whether the person had led a moral and righteous life (luminous soul) or an immoral and evil life (dark soul). Some rabbis stated that the judgment in the grave for the dark souls would be more severe than that in Gehenna. In this time period Gehenna became interpreted as hell, with all sorts of elaborate punishments depicted for those who had sinned during their lives. Just as Gehenna became hell, Gan Eden became heaven with elaborate descriptions of the heavenly realm. The more righteous a person had been in his life, the more wonderful would be the heavenly rewards.

Medieval Jewish philosophers tackled the afterlife during the medieval time period. The Jewish philosophical writings emerged as a result of a blending of rabbinic viewpoints with Greek, Christian, and Arabic philosophies. The principle philosophers of this time were Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, Gersonides and Nahmanides.

Gaon's Immortal Soul. Saadia Gaon (882 - 942 A.D.) believed that God created the soul in the human embryo, and because of this, the soul was immortal. This belief was in conflict with the Midrash teachings of a preexistent storehouse of souls (*guf*). Although Plato believed in the non-material nature of the soul, Gaon considered that the soul was comprised of a spiritual, transparent substance that was as pure as the heavenly spheres. This soul achieved luminosity as the result of the light it had received from God. This is

somewhat related to the brilliant light people reported who have had NDEs.

Although the soul was a unity, it had a three-fold division into *nefesh* (appetitive awareness), *ruah* (ability to experience emotions such as anger and courage), and *neshamah* (the ability to have cognition and reasoning). At the time of death, the soul existed as this unity. Ethical and moral people would have a bright and luminous soul. People who were immoral and evil would have a soiled, stained and darkened soul. The darkness of the soul is reminiscent of the few reports of evil people who had a dark and dismal NDE.

Gaon also believed that while alive, a person was capable of repentance (*teshtrvah*). However, once a person died, his soul could no longer be purified. The rewards or punishment would take place at the end-of-days. The righteous would have luminous light in Gan Eden (reminiscent of the luminescent light of many NDEs). The wicked would have a burning fire in Gehenna.

At the end-of-days, there would be a physical union of body and soul. Gaon did not believe the possibility of reincarnation.

Maimonides' Separate Body and Soul. Moses ben Maimon (1135 - 1204 A.D.) was known as Rambam or most often, Maimonides. He believed that the body and soul were completely separate. Living people could not understand the pleasures of the spiritual world Maimonides' concept of the soul was similar to that of Aristotle — having three divisions: (1) vegetative (controls procreation and nourishment); (2) sensory (controls imagination, sense perception and movement); and (3) rational (controls reasoning).

At the time of death, the first two aspects of the soul ceased. However, the rational and intellectual aspect was retained as the portion of the soul that understood universal truths and concepts. If a living person advanced intellectually, he/she would be able to know the spiritual world and eventually attain immortality of the soul. For people who were moral and righteous,

the third part of the soul experienced the bliss of *Olam Ha-Ba* (The world to come). *Olam Ha-Ba* was a spiritual realm that was entered by righteous souls immediately after death. The blissful state of the soul in *Olam Ha-Ba* was incomprehensible for a living person. Maimonides stated that there is no comparison between the bliss of the soul in the afterlife and the feelings of joy, pleasure or even euphoria that living people experience. The spiritual bliss is incomparable and unsearchable. This is also reminiscent of the reports of people who have had a NDE. Almost every one of them has stated that the bliss that they felt in the NDE was beyond comprehension and impossible to adequately communicate. Maimonides further stated that people who were evil and wicked would be excluded from *Olam Ha-Ba* and remain as isolated matter.

Maimonides still followed the traditional concept that, at the end-of-days, there will be a physical resurrection of body and soul but only for the righteous. So the righteous soul had it both ways: it went to the blissful *Olam Ha-Ba* immediately after death and again at the end-of-days. His concept of the end-of-days resurrection was somewhat contradictory. At first, there would be a physical resurrection of souls with their own bodies, and these resurrected beings would live a long life in the messianic era. However, eventually the resurrected dead would return to the dust, and their souls would exit their bodies and continue to exist in a form similar to the angels.

Gersonides' Two Intellects. Levi ben Gershom (1288 - 1344 A.D.) was known as Ralbag by the Jews and Gersonides by the Christians. He considered that each human had two intellects: a human (material) intellect and an agent (acquired) intellect. When an individual died, his human intellect was lost. The knowledge that was acquired through the use of the human intellect remained as part of the agent intellect and was the immortal soul. No new knowledge could be acquired after death. This was similar to Maimonides' viewpoint about the

importance of acquired knowledge. These concepts are reflective of the NDEs of many who have reported that they received the message that the attainment of knowledge is very important as a preparation for the afterlife.

Nahmanides' Two Edens. Moses ben Nahman (1194 - 1270 A.D.) was known as Rambam or most frequently, Nahmanides. He believed that when an individual died, his/her deeds were evaluated and rewarded or punished. The completely righteous souls were immediately inscribed and sealed and entered the first Gan Eden. The completely wicked were also immediately inscribed and sealed and sent to Gehenna for their punishment. Punishment was given in proportion to one's deeds. Most souls were in Gehenna for a maximum of twelve months. The thoroughly wicked remained there for many generations. For most souls, after twelve months they entered Gan Eden, but their experience there was not as blissful as that of the completely righteous. Those souls that were intermediate between the righteous and the wicked cried out in prayer and were sent to a place of tranquility.

The next judgment took place at the end-of-days when the body and soul were united during resurrection. Hence, unlike Maimonides who makes contradictory statements about *Olam Ha-Ba*, for Nahmanides, the completely righteous' souls went to the first Gan Eden immediately after death and remained there until the end-of-days when the souls reunited with their bodies in the blissful *Olam Ha-Ba* (The World to Come). They would remain there for ever and ever. Nahmanides, therefore, disagreed with Maimonides, who considered *Olam Ha-Ba* to be an immortal realm — but only for souls.

Hasidism: Mystical Judaism With a "Righteous One." Hasidism is a mystical Jewish movement that was founded in the mid-eighteenth century in the Ukraine by Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. It emphasizes ecstatic devotion and religious fervor over scholarship and legalism. Unique to Hasidism was the concept of the righteous one (the *tzaddik*). He was considered to be

an intermediary between a person and God. The tzaddik was the means through which a divine blessing (*shefa*) was transmitted to people. The tzaddik was also considered to be a spiritual redeemer of souls. The tzaddik was conceived as a holy man who had the powers to control life and death and to travel in the worlds beyond death in ways similar to that of shamans of many different primitive cultures. Hasidism integrated the concept of the tzaddik with the kabbalistic viewpoint of the journeys of the postmortem soul (to be fully discussed after the current Jewish viewpoints).

Current Jewish Viewpoints. The major divisions of current Judaism are Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. The orthodox adheres to strict biblical, talmudic and midrashic interpretations. Each successive movement is less strict in its interpretations. Each division has some concept of the afterlife, but much more attention is placed on living one's life fully in God's way. Every year from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur God judges all on their deeds for the preceding year, and the result determines whether they live or die. Nevertheless, with the renewal of interest in spirituality and Kabbalah and concern with life after death, these concepts are becoming more popular in Judaism as a whole.

Of all of the Judaic concepts, for afterlife considerations, the kabbalistic viewpoint is most important.

Kabbalah

The History: Kabbalah (Qabala, Cabala) is the major formalized type of Jewish mysticism. It developed in Provence (formerly a separate country, now a part of France) and Spain from the 13th to the 15th centuries and in Palestine in the 16th century. Some believe that it actually originated in ancient Sumer as a religion separate and distinct from Judaism. Babylon succeeded Sumer, and the ancient teachings were then transmitted to the Hebrews who were held

captive in Babylon. In this viewpoint, many elements of their ancient religion were incorporated into the Book of Genesis of the Hebrew Bible (the Torah). It was then believed that in the second century, the Jews added to the kabbalistic lore with a book known as the *Sepher Yetzirah*.

In the 13th century, the principal text of the Kabbalah was written. It is known as the *Zohar* and is a mystical commentary on the Torah. The *Zohar* soon came to the attention of Christian scholars and initiated an interest in the Kabbalah by a wide range of European occultists and mystics. Hence the Kabbalah became an important component of such groups as the Rosicrucians and Freemasons. Others who later incorporated kabbalistic concepts into their teachings were the Theosophists and the Golden Dawn. Collectively, these groups were known as Anglo-Kabbalah. An essential teaching of the Kabbalah is that those patterns that govern the universe's operation are found in the deepest soul of a human, as well as the forces that drive those patterns.

Before considering the kabbalistic viewpoint of the afterlife journey, first it is necessary to examine the kabbalistic concept of the soul in the living person.

The Living Soul: The soul is unified, but it has three levels for most individuals (as discussed previously, first considered by the medieval Jewish philosopher, Saadia Gaon) and two higher, sublime levels of intuitive cognition that can only be within the reach of a few chosen people. The levels are:

Nefesh: This is the lowest level of the soul and is known as appetive awareness or bioenergetic field. It is the vital energy of the physical body that animates and preserves it. *Nefesh* originates at the moment of birth.

Ruah: This is the second level of the soul and is known as emotional awareness or emotional energy field. *Ruah* is the emotional or feeling aspect of the soul.

Neshamah: This is the third or supernal level of the soul and is known as intellect, transpersonal self and higher mind. *Neshamah* is the intellectual, mental or thinking aspect. It is

the bridge between human and divine levels of the soul.

Hayyah: This is the subconscious level of the soul and is known as spiritual, divine life force or universal self. Hayyah could be achieved by some people during meditation, and it is a connection to the source of Eternal Life, God.

Yehidah: This is the highest level of the soul where all of the soul's faculties are unified with God. Yehidah is known as essence, innermost uniqueness and transcendental field of light. It can only be achieved by few people while still alive. It would require a very deep level of meditation to reach this level.

The Voyage of Your Afterlife Soul: Now, let us consider the post-mortem fate of your soul. As you die, you are blessed with a vision of the Shekhinah, the female essence of God. The Shekhinah appears as a formless, radiant image. When your soul sees the Shekhinah, it goes out in joy and love to meet Her. If you had been righteous during your life, your soul cleaves and attaches to Her. If you had not been righteous, your soul is left behind and mourns for the separation from its body. The radiance and love relationship of the Shekhinah is reminiscent of the NDErs seeing a celestial being of light and feeling intense love.

As you die, the Angel of Death also makes an appearance. If you were virtuous during life, then your soul cannot be harmed by the Angel of Death. If you were not virtuous, then your soul is subjected to punishment.

As your soul separates from your body, it has the experience of being welcomed into the post-mortem realms by deceased family members and friends. This is a common manifestation of NDEs.

While dying, you are given a life review, an instant recall of all life occurrences. This is another manifestation often observed in NDEs.

Now, let us consider the fate of the five integrated components of your soul.

Nefesh: This remains closely attached to your physical body and experiences the pangs of

the grave (*Hibbut Ha-Kever*). As discussed previously, this is a 3-to-7 day process that originated in the Talmudic and Midrashic time periods.

Ruah: The process of separation of your soul from its body is considered to be painful and emotional. However the pain can be lessened. *Dumah*, the guardian of the dead, appears to the departing *Ruah* and asks its name. If your soul remembers its name, that will minimize its struggle to leave your body. *Ruah* next experiences the "catapult" (*kajha-kela*): your soul is believed to be thrown about or catapulted through the postmortem realms. This can be compared to the rapid upward movement often found in NDEs.

As your soul leaves, your body decomposes and separates into four elements. Once your soul departs, it becomes enveloped by a separate field of light known as a "transparent body" (*gufha-dak*). This again is similar to the NDErs who frequently are surrounded by a brilliant light. However, you would receive this celestial garment only if you were righteous. If you were wicked, your soul would go naked to its fate. As previously discussed, some non-righteous individuals who had NDEs did not experience the brilliant light, but rather had a hellish experience.

Ruah next goes through the twelve-month purgations of Gehenna. However, if you were righteous during life, you wear the celestial garment and do not suffer the torment of Gehenna. In contrast, if you were wicked and never repented, you could remain in Gehenna forever.

As mentioned before, these concepts originated in the medieval time period. The severity of your purgation depends upon your lifestyle — the more wicked one was, the more severe the punishment. In essence, purgation functions as an abreaction — discharge and catharsis. It is also a time for purification and allows for progressive resolution of painful, incomplete emotions. It could be seen as similar to a prolonged, intensive psychotherapy. It is the process in which *Ruah* gets to deal with unresolved and

unconscious emotional issues. Hence, it can be seen that, if you had led a relatively good life and dealt with the negative emotions such as fear, anger, hate, and frustration, very little, or any, punishment would occur in Gehenna. However, if you failed to learn in life how to deal with these negative emotions, there remains an opportunity to resolve them in the afterlife at Gehenna and still be able to have a blissful afterlife.

From Gehenna, your purified Ruah moves toward healing and transformation, with its next stop being Lower Gan Eden (first mentioned by the medieval Jewish philosopher, Nahmanides), which is considered to be the Earthly Garden of Eden. It is here that the process of purification and preparation for entry into Upper Gan Eden occurs. If all goes well, your soul goes to Upper Gan Eden.

Neshamah: If you were righteous during life, this part of your soul directly enters the sublime regions of Upper Gan Eden (also first mentioned by Nahmanides), which is the realm of heavenly delights. In these regions are schools of learning and understanding. NDErs often revealed that the importance of learning was stressed to them. In Upper Gan Eden, light is brilliant. Immersion in the divine light source serves to further purify your soul of any lingering psychic recollections of Earthly existence. Your soul then enters the "River of Light" and becomes completely purified and is ready to come before the presence of the Master of the Universe. It is of interest that a few NDErs stated that they ascended into heaven where the light was brilliant beyond description.

Hayyah and Yehidah: If you are one of the truly enlightened people, these two aspects of your soul would be linked, and they enter the Bundle of Life or the Bundle of the Living (*tzor ha-hayyim*), the divine region where all souls are stored. It is also known as the storehouse of souls. This concept originated in the Talmudic and Midrashic time periods.

If you had been an ordinary person, your soul, which had gone through the various other realms and reached Upper Gan Eden thoroughly

purified, now enters the *tzor ha-hayyim*. This is the center where souls are given their assignment for subsequent incarnations. This based on the kabbalistic doctrine of reincarnation of souls (*gilgul*).

The Voyage of Your Afterlife Soul Continues: Reincarnation and Beyond. Reincarnation is an ancient tradition that has been incorporated into various traditions throughout the world. For the kabbalists, reincarnation is for the purpose of the soul's restitution for the wrongdoings of a previous life and to attain further perfection. Unlike Hinduism or Tibetan Buddhism, the vast majority of kabbalists did not believe in reincarnation into the bodies of animals. For the most part, they did not believe that all souls get reincarnated — only those that had some imperfections remaining or had a pressing need to return to Earth.

The concept of reincarnation most likely entered the Kabbalah through the influence of Plato, Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism, ancient Gnostics (early Christian mystics) and the Christian Cathars (an 11th century pseudo-Christian (according to the Catholics) mystical group). The kabbalists embraced the widespread Jewish notion of the resurrection of the dead at the end-of-days. If your soul had gone through reincarnation, the predominant belief was that only the last body that had been firmly planted and took root would have physical resurrection.

At the end-of-days, the vast majority of deceased do not undergo reincarnation. Therefore, with the resurrection there is a physical union of body and soul with complete actualization. However, the kabbalistic viewpoint is that then the soul will merge with the source of the Divine Being. Does that mean the soul has no memory of its former Earth life or no possibility of contact with living family and friends? If that is true, I prefer, the end-of-life concept of the medieval Jewish philosopher, Nahmanides. Nevertheless, it is stated for the kabbalists, the idea of death was not distressful or anxiety provoking. This is because they considered that death was

not the end but rather another phase in the continuous process of coming closer to God. So, maybe eventual merging with God does not preclude former memories and contact with the living.

Kabbalah and NDEs. The kabbalistic afterlife journey occurrences are similar to many components of the NDE. These include: the catapulted surge out of the physical body; the brilliant light; the Celestial Being of Light; meeting

deceased relatives and friends; a life review; and learning that love and learning are the most important aspects. In addition, only virtuous people have this splendid afterlife. Evil people have to suffer in their afterlife journey. This is also found in certain NDEs when criminals and people who attempt suicide often have hellish episodes.

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