

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Jewish Views of the Afterlife, by Simcha Paul Raphael.**  
Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1994, 474 pp, \$40.00,  
hb; and 1996, \$30.00, pb.

If you think there are no Jewish traditions about life after death and the phenomena of the near-death experience (NDE), this book will make an important addition to your library. *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* contains extensive research on many texts showing a complex skein of Jewish views on life after death. Its sources include the Bible, the Apocrypha, rabbinic teachings, medieval philosophy and legends, and the mystical traditions of the Kabbalah and Hasidism. The author, Simcha Paul Raphael, also synthesizes premodern mystical Jewish philosophy with the emerging postmodern disciplines of transpersonal psychology, consciousness research, and near-death studies.

Nearly 15 years in the making, this book spans 4,000 years of Jewish thought. It is encyclopedic in its depth of coverage and makes an excellent reference in the field of Jewish studies and thanatology. Each chapter is outlined in detail in the "Contents" section in the front of the book and summarized at the end, which allows the reader to scan the tome and focus on topics of interest.

This book proves beyond all doubt that, despite a deep strain of ambivalence toward the dead dating from the early Biblical period, Jewish belief in the continuation of life was universal in all but the last century. Philosophy evolved from the Biblical vision of resting in an amoral realm called Sheol; to elaborate vistas of postmortem judgment, heaven (Gan Eden), and hell (Gehenna); followed by com-

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munal resurrection in the World to Come (*Olam Ha-Ba*), where the Messiah will unite soul and body of the faithful. The complex and often conflicting beliefs culminated in late medieval mystical traditions.

Why, then, don't more people outside the small Orthodox and Jewish Renewal community know about this rich eschatological tradition? Raphael explains that in our own century Jewish belief was dimmed by modernity's ridicule of the supernatural and blackened out in the communal horror following the Holocaust. A rationalistic philosophical bias has led to a paucity of translation from the source material into English, the language of the majority of the world's Jews. Most modern Jews are alienated from a traditional understanding of the nature of God, humankind's purpose, and life's destiny. A Gallup poll taken in 1965 (detailed in a table on page 29 of this book) showed that only 17 percent of American Jews believed in life after death, compared with 78 percent of Protestants and 83 percent of Catholics. It is beyond the scope of this review to explain or judge this development, but I simply note it as the prime result of the inaccessibility, until now, of these data.

After reviewing historical beliefs, Raphael focuses on a fascinating period from the 12th through the 16th centuries, when ancient mystical teachings were first recorded. These were esoteric and theosophical beliefs that had previously been passed on from teacher to disciple, starting around 70 A.D. in the early Rabbinic period. Ironically, this corpus, which came to be called the Kabbalah, developed during the same period as the rationalistic Judaism of Moses Maimonides.

*The Zohar* (1956), a primary Kabbalistic text, provides a clear description of the dying process and postmortem destiny of the soul. This book, only partially translated into English as of this writing, is a major source of information about the afterlife. It describes the dying process in a manner similar to that described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Fremantle and Trungpa, 1975). There can be a period of torment in which the four corners of the earth "indict the dying" (p. 295), as in the Tibetan view of the four elements—earth, air, water, and fire—dissolving as a person is released from the body. For the prepared sage, though, the transition can be as smooth as "taking a hair out of milk" (p. 371), allowing a person to die consciously and without fear.

There are many correlations with familiar features of the NDE. The dying person meets with family ancestral guides and Adam; is

welcomed by angels of protection, judgment, and death; has his or her life's deeds judged; passes through the Cave of Machpelah at the tomb of the Patriarchs; and is received by an aspect of divinity called the *Shekhinah*, God's indwelling presence, which is without form and cloaked in a glorious robe of pure light. Like the compelling radiance of the light seen in NDEs (Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980, 1984), the lure of this transcendent being is irresistible for those whose time has come: "No man dies before he sees the *Shekhinah*, and because of its deep yearning for the *Shekhinah* the soul departs in order to see her" (p. 288, citing *The Zohar*, 1956, III, 88a).

We see, then, correspondences to many elements in near-death literature: visions of the departed, a dark tunnel-like entrance, angels, a being of light, and the life review. The mystical literature reveals the feelings accompanying the journey, which are those of great joy and ecstasy at these reunions and welcome by divine beings, or of horror and pain over "sins" or errors in one's conduct during life.

Deathbed visions are only the first stage. They are followed by the separation from the physical body, called the *hibbut ha-kever*. Translated as "pangs of the grave," this is similar to the out-of-body experience, but more extensive in both scope and time. It includes a period of from three to seven days postmortem, in which the soul revisits the people and places it frequented during life. This is a common time for mourners to see or sense apparitions of their loved ones, as Melvin Morse pointed out (Morse and Perry, 1994).

The second stop after death is at a place called Gehenna, similar to purgatory rather than hell. Raphael believes its purpose is to unburden negative feelings over the life just lived and achieve emotional purification. The sojourn here lasts no longer than a year. The literature describes many grisly tortures meted out here in an "eye-for-an-eye" style justice as expiation for sins committed during life. Through torment and despair as well as purgation in fire and snow, the soul is cleansed of all of its impurities.

Next the being ascends to a heavenly realm with two levels: Lower and Upper Gan Eden (Garden of Eden), which correspond to increasingly supernal realms of paradise: "The disembodied soul encounters the light of Gan Eden by dipping in what is called the River of Light, or *nehar dinur*" (p. 309).

Visionary tours of Gan Eden from Medieval religious stories, or midrash, describe seven heavens, guarded by myriads of angels, some beautiful and others terrible to see, in which all beings, enraptured by the love and truth (Torah) of God, dwell in the midst of dazzling

splendor and radiance. The accounts describe as many as seven realms, surrounded by three walls each, and are secured by gates that are guarded by multitudes of angels. The *Masekhet Gan Eden*, or Tractate of Gan Eden, offers stirring descriptions:

Thus says Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: Gan Eden has two gates of carbuncle, and sixty myriads of ministering angels keep watch over them. Each of these angels shine like the radiance of the heavens. When the righteous person approaches them, the angels remove from him the clothes in which he had been buried, and clothe him with eight clouds of glory. . . . And in every corner there are sixty myriads of ministering angels singing with sweet voices, and the tree of life and its flowering branches stands in the middle and overshadow [sic] all of Gan Eden; and it has fifteen thousand tastes, and each one unique. (pp. 186-187)

This sublimity is also not eternal. Beyond Eden, the fourth and final level is a spiritual world called *Tzror ha-hayyim*, the “bundle of the living” or “storehouse of souls” (p. 392). In this holy celestial abode the highest grade of the soul is swept up into divine oneness and perfection: “If the Transit Stage of Upper Gan Eden may be described as ‘seeing God,’ this Transit Stage is the one of ‘being with God’” (p. 392).

The story does not end here, however. An ancient, deep current in popular Judaism teaches that people experience reincarnation, or *gil-gul*. It is from the fourth world that the individual is selected to be reborn. Midrashic literature claims that two angels foretell all the tasks the soul will confront during this new life, including the rewards and punishment for one’s behavior, and transmit knowledge of all things. However, before birth one of the angels touches the baby on the nose, erasing this memory (pp. 393-394).

The four postmortem levels correspond to the four types of NDEs reported by P. M. H. Atwater (1994) and the four stages in Stanislav Grof’s cartography of spiritual emergence (Grof and Bennett, 1993; Grof and Halifax, 1977). Atwater characterized NDEs as initial, hellish, heavenly, or transcendent; while Grof classified mystical journeys into four stages, corresponding to the fetus’s prenatal bliss, agonies during labor, and transcendence following release from torment after birth. Grof called these the Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPMs): BPM I is ecstasy and unity, BPM II is expulsion from paradise, BPM III is the death-rebirth struggle, and BPM IV is the death-rebirth experience in which the ego is dissolved and original bliss is regained (Grof and Bennett, 1993).

In Hindu scriptures there are also four levels, but only three bodies for the soul (Yogananda, 1974). Lowest is the physical, followed by the astral level, in which higher emotions are expressed. Next comes the causal, an almost purely mental or intellectual level, culminating in cosmic unity with the Infinite. The fourth stage does not require a body or any sort of individuation. This is similar to the deepest stage of Kenneth Ring's core experience, in which the person sheds his or her identity to melt into the oneness of the being of light (Ring, 1984).

Similarly, Raphael describes three basic levels of the soul in Jewish mystical tradition that correspond to the three Hindu bodies: *Nefesh*, or vegetative, which suffers in the grave; *Ruah*, or emotional, which enters Gehenna and Lower Gan Eden; and *Neshamah*, or higher mind, which enters Upper Gan Eden. The spiritual essence or *Hayyah* returns to the source, while a fifth, intermediary level, *Yehidah*, enters the womb, where it presumably undergoes the four pre-birth stages described by Grof.

There are similarities also to Emanuel Swedenborg's (1984) depiction of heaven as a place in which people and the angels who surround them radiate their inner qualities. Beauty there is soul-deep, coming as it does from the person's core. Different levels of heaven and hell are chosen by the person him- or herself, based on what he or she genuinely loves: God or self. Chapter 57 in Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* is, indeed, entitled: "The Lord does not cast anyone into Hell; rather, the person himself does" (p. 452). Similarly, the writings cited in Raphael's book emphasize that there are many levels to Gehenna and Gan Eden, where places are assigned based on the person's worthiness.

Raphael's book shows that Judaism affirms clearly that mind itself is undying, even after the brain shuts down, with universal divine consciousness being the primary and final destination after the flimsy garment of embodied life is shuffled off by an immortal spirit. This is similar to the message implied by NDEs and visions of deceased loved ones seen by the bereaved. Furthermore, like the message of the radiant NDE to the unprepared or supposedly unworthy, there is a happy ending for everyone in mystical Jewish tradition. All souls complete the emotional and mental aspects of their personality and ascend to the spiritual source. The tradition of *gilgul*, or reincarnation, gives people other chances to return to embodied life to grow in wisdom and compassion and to evolve into a purified state suitable for permanent residence in the numinous realms.

The doctrine of transmigration of souls, once widely held by both Christians and Jews, was first declared to be heresy by the Church Fathers in the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 A.D. (Grof and Bennett, 1993). The Jewish gnostic belief in reincarnation became popular from the 12th century onward and persists in certain circles, such as the Orthodox Lubavitchers, today. It has been out of mainstream currency for so long that modern Jewish thought doesn't even bother to discount it.

Raphael makes the final point that he concurs with Grof that the postmortem teachings of the world's sacred writings depict the state of consciousness people encounter during and after death:

In other words, as Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi often explains, "eschatology equals psychology"—*metaphoric depictions of the various psychological states of experienced reality by the disembodied consciousness after death.* (p. 363, italics in original)

Using a Kabbalistic framework, and referring to familiar NDE landmarks along the way, Raphael weaves the stages described earlier into a coherent model covering the transition from life to death to transcendence to rebirth. He concludes with a provocative plan for educating rabbis, educators, counselors, and Jewish funeral directors about this important message and integrating its "soul guiding" (p. 401) message into contemporary Judaism. Using the model of conscious dying practiced by 19th century Hasidic rabbis, death becomes a time of joy and reunion rather than fear: "This world is like a vestibule before the World to Come, and death is the gateway between the two worlds, the door into the heavenly spheres" (p. 341).

Indeed, literature from the world's religions agrees with accounts of NDEs and deathbed visions that nobody dies alone. If one can live with divine love and awareness in everyday life, death will come as a familiar companion, rather than as a dark, hooded stranger. Not surprisingly, the most consistent change following an NDE is the loss of fear of death (Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980, 1984). Acceptance of death would mean a profound and healing change in the experience of death, mourning, and health care, particularly in America and other Western, skeptical cultures.

I have concerns, though, about Raphael's proposal to transform the Jewish experience of dying and mourning. He glosses over the controversy that may arise due to conflicting beliefs drawn from earlier ideas, painstakingly covered in the early chapters, about Judgment Day, the coming of the Messiah, and the timing of individual versus

collective eschatology. I doubt that all students of the faith will agree with his conclusions. The secrecy shrouding Jewish mysticism has successfully kept it hidden until very recently, and the conflicting views held by most proponents of modern Judaism, rooted as it is in Maimonides' scholasticism, sets up a strong opposing viewpoint. This is paralleled by the conflicting beliefs held by modern scientists and physicians about spiritual versus natural causes of the NDE. These contrasting viewpoints on human destiny are rooted in competing epistemological paradigms that will not soon be reconciled. However, I admire Raphael's feat in articulating an alternate *zeitgeist*, and I offer this more as a caution than a criticism.

For 50 years the Jewish people have lived with the rage and shock of surviving Adolf Hitler's Final Solution. Modern Jews hear naturalistic homilies at funerals claiming that the deceased live on in their loved ones' memories and through their children. This offers no consolation for grief over martyrs who died together, erasing from this world both the memories and descendants. Daily headlines prove that the world's people have not learned the futility of ethnic and religious hatred. Seeing death as "a window and not a wall," as Raphael insists (p. 402), is the greatest antidote to personal and collective grief over the horror of genocide. By providing Jewish sources of meaning in death, the Western world's oldest religious tradition proves that it still offers meaning in life.

Moreover, Raphael's book adds a Jewish voice to the cacophony of other traditions that avow that life continues. It clearly shows that Jewish belief in life after death and many elements of the NDE is older and deeper than contemporary doubts.

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