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What Happens After I Die?: A rabbi ponders the imponderable.

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Abstract (summary)

How do we account for this neglect despite the prevalence of the ideas of Gan Eden and Gehinnom (heaven and hell), olam haba (the world to come) in the rabbinic literature of the Talmud, in Jewish mysticism, and in medieval Jewish philosophy? Despite the... Show all

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Jews rarely speak of life after death.

How is it that as a rabbi called upon to officiate at funerals, deliver eulogies, comfort the bereaved, I am rarely questioned about the disposition of the soul after death or the place of heaven or hell, or the belief in the physical resurrection of the dead? How is it that in the discussions about the meaning of the Holocaust and the destruction of one-third of our people, the Jewish position on the hereafter plays no part?

How do we account for this neglect despite the prevalence of the ideas of Gan Eden and Gehinnom (heaven and hell), olam haba (the world to come) in the rabbinic literature of the Talmud, in Jewish mysticism, and in medieval Jewish philosophy? Despite the praises of God's "calling the dead to eternal life" in the daily prayer book and the references to paradise (Gan Eden) in the El Male' prayer recited at the funeral and during Yizkor services, the afterlife does not function as a major Jewish belief among modern Jews.

The this-worldliness in modern Judaism is not devoid of traditional Jewish roots. For one thing, the Five Books of Moses make no explicit references to another world beyond the grave. The Bible refers to the death of each of the patriarchs as his being "gathered to his kin" (Gen. 25:8; 35:29; 49:29, 33). One of the psalms recited in the festival Hallel prayer declares: "The dead cannot praise the Lord, nor any who go down into silence. But we [the living] will bless the Lord, now and forever. Hallelujah" (Psalm 115).

Carrying out this theme, traditionalist Jews at the funeral cut the fringes of the prayer shawl that is placed around the shoulders of the deceased. That custom is explained as symbolizing the belief that the deceased have no mitzvot, no deeds to be fulfilled. To be alive is to have deeds to perform and imperatives to be followed.

In Judaism the extraordinary emphasis on life in this world makes a second life elsewhere appear as pale compensation. Death is regarded by some Jewish thinkers as an insult, a contradiction to the purpose of religious life. The mourner's act of tearing a part of his clothing, they suggest, expresses anger at this assault upon life and its promises.

The Nobel literary prize winner S.Y. Agnon suggested that the Kaddish the mourner recites to magnify God's name is meant to console God, for the loss of a human being diminishes the strength and glory of the Creator. The mourner's Kaddish itself speaks not of death or of another world but of life in this world and in our time. The ritual of the Kaddish calls for a minyan, a living community of at least ten Jews, to honor the deceased. So the memory of the deceased depends on the presence of life.

In matters of faith such as that of the afterlife there are no scientific or logical proofs. If "seeing is believing," what is it we are looking for in speaking about God, soul, immortality, resurrection?

Science measures and weighs what is, faith is concerned with what ought to be.

Following that distinction, we may find a clue to the beliefs about the afterlife. What fears and what yearnings of the spirit in this life go into the belief in the continuation of life after death?

The hope for life after death may be related to our discontent with the status quo. The world in which there is so much poverty, war, illness, a world in which innocence suffers and wickedness prospers cannot be the last word of God. Seen in this light, *olam haba* (the world to come) expresses a protest against the injustices and imperfections of this world. In Judaism this world and everything in it is far from perfect. As the Talmud puts it, the grain needs to be ground, the bitter herbs need to be sweetened, the soil must be plowed, "everything requires mending."

There is a huge gap between the world as is and the world that ought to be. That vacuum is filled by belief in another world in which to live. For some, then, belief in another world is driven by the conscience to compensate the victims of this world. Yet, for others, otherworldliness is suspect lest it be exploited by those who seek to delay forever the tasks of this people, this day, in this world.

The rabbinic tradition tries to hold on to both worlds, to counter both the seduction of passivity and the submission to the status quo. Consider the surface paradox taught in the Ethics of the Fathers (*Pirke Avot*, or *Avot*): Better is one hour of repentance and good works in this world than the whole life of the world to come; and better is one hour of bliss in the world to come than the whole life of this world (4:17).

On a more personal level, let me relate the interactions of traditional Jewish wisdom and my own experience. My grandmother died three days before the festival of Sukot. The funeral was held, the mourning period, normally seven days in duration, began, but in accordance with Jewish ritual law, once the festival began, the mourning ended. The tradition is clear: *Haregel mevatal gezerat shivah* -- the festival annuls the mourning period.

I was at first somewhat resentful that the personal mourning of the family was subordinated to the public celebration of Sukot. But as I thought about the ritual rule I sensed the wisdom of the tradition. My grandmother was a devoted Jew, and she would not wish to disturb her people's joy. The consolation came from the shared conviction that her immortality was bound to the eternity of our people. Individuals die, but *ein hatzibur mait* -- the community does not die. Eleven months after her death that faith was inscribed on my grandmother's headstone. It read, in the traditional expression, *tehei nishmatah tzerurah bitzror hachayim* -- may her soul be bound up in eternal life.

But what is her "soul?" I do not understand soul as a material object but as an expression of her life. She was a woman of kindness, gentle in speech and manner, a woman of charity who baked and cooked for sick and poor, who blessed her household as she closed her eyes and raised her hands before the lit Shabbat candles. I still call to mind her counsel, her embrace, her charity. She created memories that inform my life and helped shape my values. In that sense, my grandmother enjoys an immortality of influence. In speaking of her soul I mean those godly qualities in her personality that transcend her bodily existence and affect the character of those she touched.

A celebrated comedian concluded his monologue on the afterlife with the roguish punch line: "I believe in my immortality, but I want it while I'm still alive." There are indeed intimations of immortality I have experienced while yet alive. Whenever I see my granddaughter cover her eyes before the Sabbath lights and hear her sing-song the benedictions in Hebrew, I sense a transcendent joy quite different from that derived from her recitation of a nursery rhyme. It is not the curtsy "cuteness" of her lisped recitation or her precociousness that touches me, but in her benediction lies a shock of recognition. This benediction I heard chanted by my grandmother and mother. It is intimately associated with my family and the warmth and festivity of the Sabbath table.

This blessing is a nexus, a sacred connection between my ancestors' world and that of my grandchildren. Hearing it from my grandchild, I know that I am not alone in my future. My Jewishness is validated not only by the origins of my past but by the continuities resonating in my grandchildren. I am not only descendant but ancestor of my tradition.

Immortality, mine, my people's, and others, refers to something infeasible, something sacred that will not be trampled underfoot. I hope -- don't we all? -- to leave a shadow on this earth to offer testimony that I have lived. For all this humor the comedian may have been right in his desire to have immortality here and now. It's a question of knowing where to look for it.

A legend tells of the angels who were jealous that God was to create the human being in God's own image. That image is immortal. God and his human creations would share immortality. Why, then, were Adam and Eve so anxious to eat from the tree of life -- the tree of immortality -- after they ate from the tree of knowledge? Because they learned that the angels plotted to hide it from them.

One angel proposed that immortality be hidden from them in the mountains or the seas far beyond the reach of man or woman. But others argued that human beings would climb the mountains and plumb the oceans to find it.

Then the shrewdest angel of all suggested that immortality be hidden within and between human beings. That angel surmised that within and between would be the last place on earth people would search to discover eternal life, now that we know the secret. Immortality is within and between us, and its intimations are here and now.

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