

## NOTES FOR MAY 13 CLASS WITH RABBI NANUS:

### DO JEWS BELIEVE IN AN AFTERLIFE? (You'd be surprised!)

**“In the World-to-Come there will be no eating or drinking or procreation, or business or jealousy or hatred, but the righteous will sit with crowns on their heads, feasting on the radiance of the Shechina, the Divine Presence.” (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 17a)**

**“All Israel have a portion in the World-to-Come.” (Mishna, Sanhedrin 10:1)**

**“The righteous among the nations of the world have a share in the World-to-Come.” (Tosefta Sanhedrin 13:2)**

### **Biblical sources**

The earliest biblical sources give only rather vague concepts of the afterlife. **Sheol** is discussed as an underground domain of the dead, neither good or bad, and beyond the care and control of God. According to the ancient three-tiered biblical world view, God was in the heavenly realm, men on earth, and dead in Sheol.

In the sixth century BCE, after Israel had suffered numerous military calamities, Sheol started to be seen as a realm of divine retribution.

Shortly afterwards, in the Book of Jeremiah, the notion of individual responsibility and retribution enters Jewish thought. The concept is clarified in Ezekiel: —The person who sins, he alone shall die. A child shall not share the burden of a parent's guilt, nor shall a parent share the burden of a child's guilt; the righteousness of the righteous shall be accounted to him alone, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be accounted to him alone.

At this point, note that the rewards are in this world: the righteous continue to live, and the wicked die and go down to Sheol. It's not until the Book of Job where the notion of a divine reward beyond the grave is first discussed. Job professes the belief that after all his suffering, he will see God.

During 200 BCE to 200 CE the complexity of the afterlife grows. Sheol becomes a realm with distinct areas for the righteous and the wicked. The dualistic concept of the afterlife develops, with **Sheol or Gehenna** being the destination for the wicked, and Paradise or Heaven the destination for the righteous. The concept of Paradise is first encountered in 1 Enoch, which is dated from the 3rd c. BCE.

## **Rabbinic Judaism**

This period spans from the destruction of the 2nd Temple in 70 CE for about a thousand years. The destruction of the temple and the establishment of the academy at Yavneh had a profound influence on all aspects of Jewish thought.

They often use the term ***Olam Ha Ba***, without ever giving a clear explanation of what it is. Olam Ha Ba is spiritual realm, in contrast with Olam Ha Zeh, this world, the physical world. Both worlds are considered important: in Mishnah Avot there are two seemingly contradictory statements. —Better is one hour of life in the World to Come than the whole of life in This World. Yet in the next breath, the same rabbi says: —Better is one hour of repentance and good works in This World, than the whole life of the World to Come. In some places Olam Ha Ba is spoken of as a place of collective reward, in others of individual reward.

There is not much discussion in the Mishnah on the nature of the afterlife realm; the focus is on the ethical behavior required to merit participation in the World to Come. In this period, the World to Come is presented as simply an improved version of This World: a place of righteousness, social justice, and material prosperity. There is wine, food, and children without effort.

The rabbis had a diverse range of ideas about what happened at death and just after: they taught that 903 different kinds of death existed in the world, the most difficult and painful due to a form of choking, and the easiest like a kiss, —like drawing a hair out of milk. They repeatedly leave little doubt that the way to an easy painless death is to lead a righteous life.

## **Kabbalah**

The Kabbalistic model is complex. The soul is seen as a three part entity, **nefesh, ruach**, and **neshamah**. Nefesh is the lowest level, similar to —life force, chi, animating energy. Ruach is the animal soul; it is seen as animating the nefesh with light that originates in the neshamah. The neshamah is the highest level, seen as a bridge between human and divine realms. From the mid 13th century the acronym NaRaN (nefesh, ruach, neshamah) became the operating term kabbalists use to describe the soul. The Zohar affirms without doubt that all three form parts of one soul.

Another author speaks of two additional transcendent dimensions of the soul, **hayyah** and **yehidah**. These five are described as nefesh—appetitive awareness; ruach—emotional awareness; neshamah—intellect; hayyah—divine life force; yehidah—uniqueness.

According to the Zohar, the nefesh remains with the body in the grave; there it undergoes judgement and suffers Hibbut Ha-Kever (pangs of the grave). The ruach goes through its

own phase of postmortem judgement in Gehanna, where it is punished for twelve months. —the ruach is purified in Gehanna, whence it goes forth roaming about the world and visiting its grave....After twelve months the whole is at rest; the body reposes in the dust and the soul is clad in its luminous vestment. In the next phases, the ruach enters Lower Gan Eden, the earthly version. The neshamah, which by all reckoning is not liable to sin, returns to its source in the celestial Gan Eden, from which she never again descends to earth. The hayyah and yehidah remain in contact with the infinite Godhead after death.

To facilitate the soul 's separation from the body, it is said the Dumah, the caretaker of souls, asks the soul its Hebrew names. The shock of death causes a sort of amnesia and being asked to recollect one's identity facilitates withdrawal from the body. Some spiritual exercises were developed to help prepare for this encounter with Dumah; even young children were taught specific liturgies to help indelibly print their Hebrew name.

### **Hasidism**

Hasidism was primarily an effort to make kabbalah accessible to the masses, and as such most of its precepts are very similar. One unique concept is that of the tzaddik, the righteous one, an evolved spiritual leader who was seen as a divine manifestation on earth. The founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov (Besht) emphasized the importance of loving the tzaddik and cleaving to him as a way of drawing closer to God. Integrating the concepts of tzaddik with kabbalah, Hasidism evolved a model of —a holy man who had the ability to control life and death and to sojourn into the worlds beyond death, in ways similar to the shamans of many primordial cultures.

### **Orthodox View of Afterlife Today**

Immediately following death there is a period known as Hibbut-Ha-Kever, pangs of the grave. During this period, the soul is confused, lingers around the body, and tries to go back to his home and be with his loved ones. After this, there is a maximum period of 12 months in Gehenna, which is a realm described as fiery where the soul is purified of its sins. The custom of reciting Kaddish for one's parents for 11 months was instituted by Rabbi Moses ben Israel Isserles of Cracow in the sixteenth century. His rationale was that since twelve months in Gehenna was the maximum punishment for sinners, one would not want to assume that one's dead father or mother had been allocated the maximum punishment. After being purified in Gehenna, the soul goes to Gan Eden. The perfectly righteous don't have to pass through Gehenna. The completely and unrepentant wicked are —cut off and have no portion in Olam Ha Ba. Gan Eden is viewed as another transitory phase; there will be a physical resurrection, after which, the souls will reside in a spiritualized state of existence in the Olam Ha Ba.