

What Is the Jewish Afterlife Like?

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From dark netherworld populated by ghosts to reincarnation to multiple souls: The Jewish concept of the afterlife has been to hell and back.

There's a Jewish joke that says there's no Heaven or Hell: we all go to the same place when we die, where Moses and Rabbi Akiva give constant and everlasting classes on the Bible and the Talmud. For the righteous this is eternal bliss, while for the wicked this is eternal suffering.

But that's a joke. What do Jews actually believe happens to them after death?

There is no simple answer: at different times and in different places, Jews had different ideas. These varying thoughts were never reconciled or canonically decided. Thus, even today, Jews believe in different, often irreconcilable, theories of what life after death is like.

We will explore these views, starting at the beginning - in the Bible.

The Biblical era: A dark netherworld populated by ghosts

The view of the afterlife held by ancient Jews, which can be surmised from passing references throughout the Bible, is that all people, Jews and gentiles, go to a netherworld called She'ol, a deep and dark place in which shadowy spirits called refo'im dwell. These could be summoned by the living to answer questions (1 Samuel 28:3–25), though this practice is forbidden (Leviticus 20:27). The ancients seemed to have viewed this fate as final: "Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die" (2 Samuel 14:14).

This theory of the afterlife was consistent with that held by the ancient Jews' neighbors, including the Greeks and the Babylonians. But that would change during the vicissitudes of Second Temple Judaism. A new apocalyptic eschatology took form during the epic struggle between Jews and the Hellenic world in the 2nd century BCE: that the dead would rise at the End of Days.

Martyrdom and the End of Days

There were two major reasons this theory developed at that time. One is that after the Babylonian Exile (586-638 BCE), Judaism became deeply concerned with interpreting sacred texts and deciphering their secrets. Thus passages such as "The Lord killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up" (1 Samuel 2:6) and Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14) came to be taken as attestation that the dead would rise at the End of Days.

The second reason was the rise of a new kind of Jewish hero during the Maccabean Revolt (167-160 BCE) - the martyr. A benevolent God must repay the sacrifice of a person who died for the sanctity of his name. Thus Jewish writings of the period hold that while we all die, death is only temporary, and in the future all will receive their just rewards.

As much is clearly stated in the Book of Daniel, which purports to be written during the Babylonian Exile, but was really written during the Maccabean Revolt: "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (12:2).

The Sadducees don't buy it, but are lost

While the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead pervaded Jewish writing during the Second Temple period, it was apparently not universally accepted. According to Josephus, a Jewish historian writing at the end of the first century CE, the question of afterlife was a major point of contention for Jewish theologians of the period.

The Sadducees, the prominent priestly class who ran the Temple, did not believe in an afterlife, nor in the resurrection of the dead, Josephus writes. Meanwhile, their counterparts and adversaries, the Pharisees, an elite of experts in Jewish law, believed in both.

Once the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the Sadducees and their theology were lost, and the Pharisees and their conception of the afterlife became mainstream rabbinical Judaism.

Thus from the time of early rabbinic Judaism, belief in the afterlife and the resurrection of the dead became core to the faith. "All Israel have a portion in the world to come," the Mishnah (200 CE) states, only to qualify this statement with a list of Jews who are excluded: "One who maintains that resurrection is not a biblical doctrine, the Torah was not divinely revealed, and a heretic." (Sanhedrin 10:1).

Paradise and Hell make an appearance

It was during this period that early concepts of heaven, called the Garden of Eden, and Hell, called Gehenom, start to appear in Judaism.

This was also the time early Christianity started to splinter from rabbinic Judaism, and thus these Jewish concepts of the afterlife found their way into Christianity.

While the Mishnah doesn't elaborate on the afterlife, the Talmud (redacted in 500 CE) gives us a glimpse into the rabbis' view of life after death.

In Eruvin 19b, we are told that all but the most wicked are sent to Gehenom (a fiery place, according to Berakhot 57b), but their stay in the flames is temporary. After being purged of their sins, they are ushered to Heaven by Abraham.

Elsewhere (Rosh Hashanah 17a), the torments of Hell are said to be temporary for most sinners - but instead of ending in Heaven, they end in nonexistence.

Some references to the World to Come in the Talmud seem to refer to Gan Eden; others clearly refer to a time after the dead come back to life, such as this section in Berakhot 17a: "In the World to Come there is no eating, or drinking nor procreation or commerce, nor jealousy, or enmity, or rivalry – but the righteous sit with crowns on their head and enjoy the radiance of the Divine Presence."

Enter Aristotle and Plato

Descriptions of Heaven and Hell fell out of favor in the Middle Ages as Jewish scholars of the era adopted the language of the two prevailing philosophical schools of the time - the neo-Platonic school based on the theories of Plato (427-347 BCE) and the Aristotelian school based on the theories of Aristotle (384-322 BCE).

The first to write a systematic treatise on Jewish philosophy of the afterlife, and an exemplar of neo-Platonic Jewish thought, was Rabbi Saadia Gaon (882-942 CE). According to him, upon death, a man's soul - which he conceives, a-la Plato, as an emanation of God - is released from the body and is stored, along with all other souls. In the future, the Messiah will come and God will sit in judgment of the souls. The virtuous will be reunited with their bodies and live eternal lives in the World to Come, which Gaon conceives of as a world much like this one, only better. The wicked will be sent to She'ol.

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) was the first Jewish philosopher to write an Aristotelian version of Jewish philosophy, in which the soul is a form of the intelligence of God. In the World to Come, he wrote in his commentary on the Mishnah, "our souls will be informed by the knowledge of the Creator, may He be blessed, in the manner in which the heavenly bodies are informed of Him, or even more." Thus according to Maimonides, after death the righteous partake in the divine intelligence, while the wicked cease to exist.

This view of the soul does not leave much room for the resurrection of the dead, which Maimonides did list as one his Thirteen Principles of the Jewish faith, but he didn't elaborate. In fact, this created quite a scandal at the time, with rabbis complaining to him that their students were professing disbelief in the resurrection of the dead, because of him. This prompted Maimonides to write the "Essay on the Resurrection of the Dead," in which he espoused the theory that the dead will rise and then die again after a normal life, at which point they would enter the spiritual World to Come and partake in the intelligence of God.

Reincarnation reaches Judaism

While Maimonides epitomized the rationalist pole of medieval Jewish thought, a mystical stream of Judaism was taking shape and growing in prominence in the Middle Ages. A book titled "Sefer HaBahir" of unknown authorship was responsible for introducing the Eastern notion of reincarnation into Jewish thought: it would become incorporated into later Jewish mystical thought, known as Kabbalah.

The Jewish scholar Nachmanides (1194-1270) was influenced by both the rationalist and the mystical streams: he made allowance for reincarnation, though the concept had been flat-out rejected by Saadia Gaon and other rabbis.

In his highly influential book "Gate of Reward," Nachmanides elaborates his conception of the afterlife in great detail: Once a person dies he is judged. The righteous go to Garden of Eden, which he claims is a real place in this world where souls are trained for the World to Come. The wicked are sent to Gehenom, also a physical place on earth where they undergo fiery torment. The most wicked will endure the tortures of Hell for ever; the less evil will cease to exist after they are punished sufficiently; and the mildly wicked will atone for their sins in Gehenom until deemed fit to go to Garden of Eden.

At the End of Days, says Nachmanides, all residents in the Garden of Eden will reunite with their bodies and move to the World to Come. This place has two tiers: the lower souls will require some form of sustenance, while the more developed will exist like angels with wings.

This fanciful view of the afterlife described by Nachmanides is tame compared with the complex conception portrayed in the Zohar, a mystical Jewish text written by Moses de Leon (1250-1305) though purportedly written in the time of the Mishnah, and elaborated by later Kabbalist writers.

According to the Zohar, a person has three souls. One is the Nefesh, which lingers around the body of the deceased for a number of days before reincarnating into another body. The second is the Ruah, which after death is consigned to torment in a seven-tier Gehenom, but only at first. Unless the Ruah is terribly wicked, it will slowly ascend up the levels, until it is ready to be escorted by Adam to the lower level of the Garden of Eden. That is a temporary place of joy, from which the Ruah continues to the higher Garden of Eden. The third form of soul is the Neshamah, which is a part of the divine in every person and as such is completely good. Upon death it immediately goes to the higher Garden of Eden, to unite with God.

Nowadays, there isn't much agreement regarding the afterlife, even among Kabbalist writers. There are different theories regarding just how many tiers Heaven and Hell have, who goes to hell and for how long, how reincarnation fits in, and so on. Many Jews have forsaken belief in the afterlife altogether. Some suspect there is an afterlife but are agnostic about its form. Yet others profess faith in this or that theory from the list with the fervor and certainty of true believers, depending on their personal inclination and rabbinical school. Except for She'ol - the biblical original. No-one seems to believe in that anymore.

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