

I was standing in the cemetery as a coffin was being lowered. Quietly, someone present pulled me aside. "Rabbi, after you spoke at the funeral my wife and I were having a discussion. I always thought that Jews did not believe in a life after death. But you spoke about the soul of my uncle, his *nishoma*, living on with God. Was I wrong?" Rather than speak to him about what Jewish traditions taught, I asked what he believes. "What do you think happens after we die?" He paused a good while, then said, "I'm not sure ... I just always thought Judaism does not believe in anything after we die."

I, too, was taught that Jews do not believe in a heaven and hell. The dominant view was similar to that of Woody Allen who said, "I prefer to remain immortal by not dying." This is the life that there is so we ought to make the best of it while we are here. At most, we live on in the memory of others, surviving in the good they do. There is no reward, no resurrection, no return of the soul in reincarnation, no place where the righteous among our loved ones go. There is only today. Truth is the world we see. Empiricism reigns supreme.

Like the man at the cemetery, however, I am no longer so sure. Why? First, because such a view is false to what Judaism has taught and second, because to say there is only the "here and now" is not enough for many, maybe even most people. At least, it is no longer enough for me.

Job, reflecting over the pain of his life and inevitability of his death, cried out, "If a man dies, shall he live again?" His question has engaged the speculation of Jews ever since. Judaism actually offers a wide variety of teachings about the afterlife. Much of what people think will happen after they die, in fact, can find support in Jewish sources.

Are heaven and hell Jewish? Yes, although the popular notions of them are different than what Jews have written about them. Our traditions speak of an עולם הבא, a "World to Come" where the good will be rewarded and wicked not share in the fruits.

Reincarnation (as I recently heard someone quip, "it's you die and you come back, you die and you come back, you die and you come back. Who wants that?!") - is that Jewish? According to the Kabbalah it is - called גלגול הנשמות, "the turning of souls."

Surely, however, resurrection is not Jewish!? But it is. In fact, it is the classic Jewish belief, reflected in many of our prayers. Alluded to in the final verse of יגדל - "God has implanted eternal life within us" - the belief in resurrection is made explicit in the daily prayer of God's power. Early Reform Jews eliminated references to God as one who brings life to the dead, arguing that such a belief was not reasonable. Thus, in place of the traditional מחיה מתים ("who gives life to the dead") most Reform prayer books speak of God

who "gives life to all things" (מחיה הכל). Many Reform rabbis, however (including this one) say it is time to go back to the original. Even understood metaphorically, resurrection carries with it a powerful notion of comfort and hope. Resurrection is true for lives shattered and rebuilt. It is in the cooing of babies given the name of a relative they will never meet, but who is part of them forever. It gives hope that what is good about us is not lost. The afterlife is, then, anything but foreign to Jewish thought.

Belief in the afterlife is high. A 1998 survey from the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center found that 81% of Americans believe in life after death; while a survey in 2005 revealed that 59% of physicians believe in an afterlife. On the television magazine show "48 Hours" it was reported that even two-thirds of all atheists state that they believe that there is something more after we die. Near death experiences have been had by millions. Many recall vivid and strikingly similar images - including tunnels of light, peaceful meadows, and angelic figures clad in white. "No matter what the nature of the experience," reported a cover story in *US News and World Report* (March 31, 1998) the experience of nearly dying "alters some lives ... Hardened criminals opt for a life of helping others, atheists embrace the existence of a deity." Look around the world and you will find that all faiths have a belief in the afterlife. The mid-twentieth century idea, popular among many Jews, that we survive only in the memory and deeds of others is an aberration. Reform Judaism, even in its most radical manifestations, accepted the idea that the soul lives on with God, even if not defining what that means. And, among the people of Israel the belief in an afterlife was never lost. I hear of it often when speaking with people after a death. "I'm sad mom is gone, but it's good to know she's finally back with dad" or, "I can only imagine what Aunt Ida is doing now ... probably playing a round of *Mah Jongg* up there with all her cronies."

Why is belief in an afterlife so universal? Of all living creatures, human beings alone know they will someday die. They do not know, however, when that dreaded moment will occur. And they do not know what, if anything, happens beyond the door of death. Will there be recompense for my life here? Will I see those I love again? I'm afraid - can there be hope for what will come?

A few years ago Robin Williams was in a movie "What Dreams May Come", the title taken from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act III, Scene 1):

For in that sleep of death
What dreams may come
When we have shuffled
Off this mortal coil
Must give us pause.

The story is of a man so in love with his wife that the bonds remain even in a world to come. After his untimely death, Williams' character (a man named Chris) is, at first, puzzled by what he sees. His uncertainty abates when his afterlife guide tells him "You didn't disappear, Chris, you just died!" The rest of the movie tells the story of his search for his wife, Anne, who remains alive - using Anne's art as a metaphor for the heaven and hell we create. It tells how the living and dead, if love binds them, can touch.

Is this not what we teach in Judaism? Is not *Yizkor* a time to pause and contemplate what may be after the sleep of death? We remember a parent and feel comforted by their advice or challenged by their critique. We recall friends who played with us, understood us like no one else, kept us honest. We yearn for a partner or spouse and catch ourselves still hearing her voice or smelling his scent. We bring to mind children and pray, with all our hearts, that they are in a place warm and safe.

But *Yizkor* is more than memory. It is also a time for hope - a hope that what is good and lovely does not perish. Something worthy of those we loved does live on. This is our faith. This is our comfort.

And this is why I now say at funerals more than that we have only our memories. I no longer deny myself or others the possibility of hoping there is something more. We do not disappear, we just die. And so, I say, the *nishama* (the "divine breath" that makes us human) is not lost, but is with God. Our souls are bound up in the bond of life - this one and life eternal. I don't understand all the details nor do I need to. It is one of the mysteries of life. But I do believe, as has Judaism, that our lives have the ability to touch eternity for something immortal is implanted within us.

These remarks were inspired by Rabbi Marc Gellman. Some ideas came from "www.whatdreamsmay.com"