Readers' Compendium:

Soul & the Afterlife

by Lori Palatnik

What happens when you die? And how can the way you're living now affect that eternal reality?

Are you a body, or a body and a soul? Most people would answer, "I'm a body and a soul." But do we mean it? Do we live our lives and make decisions as if each of us is not just a body, but a body and a soul?

At certain times in our lives we reconnect with our souls. A wedding is a soul experience for the bride and groom, a new beginning through the spiritual union under the chuppah, the wedding canopy.

For many, going to Israel is a life-altering experience of connecting with the land, the people, and the legacy that is part of every Jew.

The birth of a child is a soul-stirring moment. We witness the miracle of creation, the wonder of a new life, and we feel the awesome responsibility of this priceless gift to guide through life.

On a journey to the countryside as we look up to a star-filled sky, we can truly see forever. A feeling of transcendence overtakes us.

A near-death experience can be a dramatic soul encounter. People do not recover from such experiences without realizing that they have been given another chance. Afterward, each new day holds new meaning, and even casual relationships turn precious.

Death itself puts us in touch with our souls. No one stands at a funeral and thinks about the menu for dinner that night. Everyone thinks, "What is life all about, anyway?" "What am I living for?" "Is there something beyond this world?"

We know that we are souls. When we look into the eyes of someone we love, we do not see random molecules thrown together. We love the essence of that person, and that essence is what we call a neshama, a soul.

"God formed man out of dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils a breath (soul) of life." (Genesis 2:7)

The soul is eternal, although the body's existence is temporary. When God decides a person's time on this earth has ended, He takes back the soul, and the body goes back to the earth, completing the cycle of creation ("... dust to dust"). For, in the beginning, the first person, Adam, was created from the dust of the ground.

The essence of our loved ones, the goodness and special qualities that they possessed, the part of them that made noble choices in life, performed good deeds, and touched the lives of others – their neshama – goes on to a world of infinite pleasure. In that world, physical sufferings do not exist, and souls bask in the light of their Creator, enjoying the rewards for all that they did here on earth.

Front-Row Seats

But what kinds of choices and deeds count? Those of people who saved the lives of others, who led armies to

victory, who discovered medical cures? Yes, those people enjoy a place in the World to Come, but so do those who led simpler lives, who performed quiet acts of kindness and made a difference to those around them. Perhaps what they did wasn't front-page news, but small acts have merit too and can mean an eternity of the deepest pleasures in the World to Come.

What we are experiencing now is called Olam Hazeh ("This World"), while the next world is referred to as Olam Haba ("The World to Come"). We are all familiar with what happens here, but what goes on in Olam Haba?

Of course no one in Jewish history ever died and came back to tell us what happens in the world beyond. Yet we are assured there is another existence. Maimonides, the 12th century scholar, includes this belief in his "Thirteen Principles of Faith." Our oral tradition speaks about it at length, and Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, is also replete with wisdom about the hereafter

Olam Haba, Heaven, is more easily understood when compared to a theater. Our Sages state that every Jew has a portion in the World to Come. This means that a seat in the theater has been reserved for each person's soul. But as in any theater, some seats are better than others. If God is "center stage," some souls will enjoy seats in the front row center section, others will sit in the balcony, and some will have obstructed views. But everyone will have a place. What seats we are assigned are based on the choices we make and the deeds that we do in Olam Hazeh, this world.

We are told that we will be surprised who gets the best seats. We will look down and say, "What are they doing there? They weren't so great!" "What are they doing up front? They didn't accomplish very much!"

And God will answer and say, "They are there because they listened to My voice."

We make a mistake when we think that only those who seem great, honored and accomplished will merit a place before God. Each person is judged individually, and we don't know what one mitzvah, one act of kindness, will make the difference when God reviews a person's life.

Listening to God does not only mean obeying the laws of what and what not to do. Hearing His voice means that we see that life isn't ruled by coincidence, that we realize that events take place for a reason, and we act accordingly. We may not know the Torah backward or forward, but if we have a relationship with our Creator, it can be worth a front row seat in eternity.

Eternal Pleasure

Our Sages say that if we took all of our life's pleasures, every one of them, and all the pleasures of everyone in this world, and brought them all together, the total wouldn't be worth even one second in the World to Come, the pleasure of being close to God.

Now, it may not have been uppermost on our minds in this world, but we know that if you were called to someone's home for a meeting, and following the meeting the host announced that God's Presence was about to arrive and wanted to communicate with you, you wouldn't say, "Well, sorry, it's getting late and I have to get up early tomorrow." You would be scared out of your mind, but there is nothing more important or more desirable than going before God, Creator of heaven and earth.

We can't imagine passive pleasure. For us pleasure is active. We go away on vacation. We ask for a raise and get it. We eat a big helping of the flavor of the month. Something happens and we feel pleasure. So how can

sitting in one place be so overwhelmingly pleasurable? Because it is an earned pleasure – what we did in our lifetime on earth has yielded this result.

In Olam Haba we are sitting before God, Who created us. He knows us inside and out. Every moment here on earth is His gift to us. He loves us more than our parents love us, more than we ever love or ever will love our children. And He calls us back to Him.

Of course people are not perfect and we all make mistakes, but those errors in judgment do not erase our good deeds. If we light candles on Friday night and then go to a movie, God does not look down and say, "Candles. Movie. We're back to square one." The act of lighting candles, the bringing in of the Sabbath, is eternal. Nothing can take it away. It is the same with every positive effort we make in life.

Of course we all make bad decisions sometimes, and some acts we deeply regret. What should we do about them? Ideally, we should take care of our mistakes here in this life. If we have wronged someone, we should make peace. If we are letting bad habits or character hold us back, we should work on breaking free and return to being the person we know we can be.

Judgment Day

When our souls leave this world and go before God, we give an accounting, and a certain judgment takes place. Judgment is not something we look forward to. Who wants to be judged? But this is not just any judge. This is God, our Father in Heaven. A human judge might be biased. But this is our Creator, who gave us life and everything that happens in our lives. His judgment of us comes from love, and anything that derives from love is for our good.

Furthermore, His judgment means that our judgments count. Life is not random; it has meaning and purpose. The decisions that we make in our lives count for something, and not just at the moment, but forever. The ultimate reward and punishment happen, but only in Olam Haba, the next world, not here in Olam Hazeh, this world.

Each year on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, God judges us. He looks at the deeds and choices that we made during the year and decides what our next year will be like – based on our efforts to correct our mistakes and the decisions that we made in our lives. But at the time of death, after the burial, we go before God Who will judge us not just on one year, but on our entire lives.

Highway to Hell

The soul can go to one of two places: Heaven, which we have discussed, or Gehenom, Hell.

We believe in Hell? It may be surprising, perhaps, but yes, we do. Why is it a surprise? Often it is a subject not brought up in Hebrew school or in the synagogues. But also the reality is that we grow up in a Christian world, where as youngsters we understand that anything Christian is not ours. And therefore, if Christians believe in Heaven and Hell, then I guess we don't.

But we do. Yet the Jewish understanding of Heaven and Hell differs from what we may hear from other religions.

Hell is a place God created to help us take care of the mistakes we didn't correct in this world. It is called Gehenom. But don't be afraid. It's not a place of devils and pitchforks, and it's not forever. If it is God's judgment that a person has to enter Gehenom, the maximum amount of time spent there would be one Jewish year. A person can be there a split second, an entire Jewish year, or somewhere in between. That is the reason that we say Kaddish, the mourner's prayer, for 11 months. We assume that our loved ones would never be there an entire year. Ideally, we want to by-pass it all together.

A great rabbi was scheduled to speak on the subject of the next world at an "Executive Lunch and Learn" series in downtown Toronto. My husband picked him up at the airport, and on the way downtown asked him to "go easy on Gehenom" with the primarily non-religious audience. He was afraid the rabbi would scare them.

The rabbi turned to my husband and asked, "Do you have hospitals here in Toronto?"

"Yes," he answered, confused.

"And," continued the rabbi, "are these world class hospitals?"

"Yes," answered my husband again.

"Would you ever want to check into these hospitals?"

"No," said my husband.

"But if you need to, aren't you glad they're there?"

The rabbi explained that Gehenom is a hospital for the soul. Going there will be painful. But it's from God's kindness, His mercy, and His love that such a place exists. We wouldn't want to check in even for a minute, but if we have to, we know it's for our good, and we hope our stay will be as short as possible.

The way to avoid Gehenom altogether is to take care of our mistakes here. This is not an easy task, but making the supreme effort in this world will ultimately avoid a much greater pain in the next.

Of Blessed Memory

Whether we are able to bypass it, or we have to spend some time in Gehenom, eventually we are able to enter the theater of Olam Haba. If we arrive and each of us is assigned a seat, does that mean we are there for eternity and that our share of pleasure is limited to our particular view? No. The people we have left on earth can increase our share in the World to Come, and enable us to earn better seating.

How does this happen? In memory of loved ones people often give charity, name babies, learn Torah in their merit, and so on. These are not just good deeds. These are acts we do in this world that have everlasting spiritual ramifications.

When we do something in someone's memory, we are saying:

Because of this person that I loved, I am living my life differently. He may be gone, but he is not forgotten. He continues to be a source of inspiration in my life. His life mattered, and his legacy will continue to make a difference.

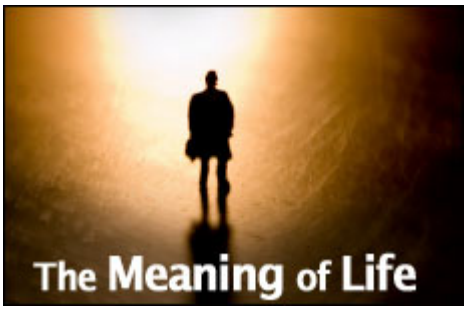
What should you do in memory of a loved one?

My husband tells people to take a 30-day period, ideally the first 30 days after the funeral, which is called the shloshim, and do something concrete in memory of the departed. For some it could be placing a coin in a tzedakah (charity) box each day and reciting a simple prayer.

Most people, after experiencing such a tremendous loss, feel a great need to do something to honor the departed. Because of the concept of Olam Haba, doing something will not only bring you comfort, but also add to the merit of the one that you have lost.

Souls in the next world have awareness. They know what goes on here. By choosing to honor them, you are making an impact far greater than you will ever know.

Excerpted from "Remember My Soul" (Leviathan Press)



by Rabbi Noah Weinberg

Jews throughout the ages have willingly given up their lives, rather than abandon being Jewish. Why? Because until you know what you are willing to die for, you have not yet begun to live.

Over the past 2,000 years in the Diaspora, Jews have had many opportunities to display their courage to stand up for Jewish beliefs. Consider Natan Sharansky – a prisoner of conscience who willingly underwent years of psychological and physical torture for the sake of being Jewish.

The pages of Jewish history are filled with thousands of Sharanskys. Whether during the Inquisition, the Crusades, the pogroms, or the myriad other persecutions and expulsions – Jews have given their lives for Judaism.

To the Western ear, "sacrificing your life for a belief" sounds like a far-too drastic action! Is there logic and reason to what our ancestors did? And where did they find the strength to lay down their lives rather than accept another religion?

Rabbi Akiva and the Shema

One of Judaism's most inspiring legends is Rabbi Akiva. Even though he only began to learn the Aleph-Bet at age 40, he applied himself with such determination that he became the greatest sage of Talmudic times.

During the first century, the Romans tried to obliterate Judaism and passed a laws prohibiting Torah study. In defiance, Rabbi Akiva gathered together his disciples and taught them Torah.

The Romans arrested Rabbi Akiva and executed him by brutally tearing the skin off his body with iron forks.

As he was being tortured, Rabbi Akiva joyously recited the Shema – "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

His students exclaimed: "Rabbi, not only do we give our lives for the sake of God, but we do so in ecstasy?!"

Replied Rabbi Akiva: "All my life, I strove for the level of dedication to sanctify God's name with my very life. Now that I have the opportunity, I joyously perform it!"

Was Rabbi Akiva superhuman? How could this "opportunity" give him so much pleasure that it completely obscured the agony of death?

Know Your Pleasures

A fundamental of Judaism is that there is nothing a human being can do for God. God has no needs. Yet at the same time He gives us everything – air, water, food, sun. And He gave us the Torah as instructions for deriving maximum pleasure from this world.

In the Shema, the Jewish pledge of allegiance, we are commanded to love God *B'chol Nafshecha* – "with all your soul." You have to be willing to sacrifice your life rather than deny God.

If mitzvot are for our pleasure... how does this give us pleasure?!

This is the pleasure of clarity and commitment. If you can perceive something as so important that you will sacrifice your own life for it, then your life has weight and purpose and direction. Because until you know what you are willing to die for, you have not yet begun to live.

Material pleasures are necessary and nice, though they do not compare to the higher pleasures of love and meaning. Imagine you're offered 10 million dollars in exchange for one of your children. After rejecting the offer, you'd be overwhelmed with the precious value of that child! You may have always known his worth on an intellectual level, but now it becomes real to you.

Similarly, once you have found a cause so meaningful that you would forfeit your life for, when you indeed live for that cause, it is with unparalleled power and pleasure.

This is the secret of Jewish heroism. This is why so many Jews throughout history have sacrificed their lives for what they believe. Because dying for God is a higher pleasure... than living without Him.

Live For What You're Willing To Die For

I once met a man who lived by this principle.

"Zev" lived in Israel when the British were still in power. He was a member of a Jewish underground movement which aimed to rout out the British by force.

During the four years that Zev was in the Jewish underground, he was completely cut off from his friends and family – forced to work as an itinerant laborer, with no place to call home. Every day he walked the streets, keeping a steady watch because the British were constantly stopping people and searching them. Any Jew found carrying a gun was guilty of a capital crime.

One day, the British made a sudden sweep, and Zev was arrested. The British realized he was from the Jewish underground and tortured him to obtain other names. Zev lost a leg from the maltreatment.

In 1948, when the British retreated, Zev was released. He went on to get married, build a business, and raise a large family.

He says: "Looking back over my whole life, unquestionably the best period was being a member of the Jewish underground. True, much of it was a miserable existence. But every moment I was completely alive. I was living for something that I was willing to die for."

Life Is About Pleasure, Not Comfort

Comfort is very nice, but it is not meaningful.

An idiot is more than capable of leading a comfortable life. He doesn't suffer much, he enjoys ice cream, insults fly right over his head, he always puts on a smile... The world is b-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l.

But he doesn't experience anything beyond his ice cream. He lacks the capacity to appreciate higher pleasures beyond the physical – relationships, meaning, and spirituality.

Living only for material pleasure and comfort is not really living. We also need to understand the deeper existential meaning of life. Sooner or later, every human being is faced with the cold, hard reality: "What's my life all about?"

The "Cause" in Jewish Life

Countless groups all over the world will surrender their lives for different causes. The Iranians will die, the Iraqis will die, the Afghanistanis, the North Koreans, the Kurds... the list is endless. So what's so special about the Jewish people?

Throughout the ages, the destiny and mission of the Jewish nation has been to teach monotheism. Jews are dying not for their own sake, but for the sake of humanity. By transmitting the message of monotheism and Love Your Neighbor, we continue to be a "Light unto the Nations" and thereby preserve the hope of world peace.

This concept was such a clear reality that it gave Jews a higher form of pleasure than anything material on Earth. Rabbi Akiva understood this. When asked to trade his life for God, he understood the idea so clearly that he could even experience joy. He knew that he was connecting with something more precious than his own life.

Despite the horrible persecutions, Jews always treasured life because we understood our power to transform the world. Yet when faced with conversion or death, we knew we had to fight or die for the sake of keeping the Jewish message alive.

Without that obstinacy and unwavering adherence to our faith, the Jewish people could never have made such an enormous impact on the ideas and values of world civilization.

Our great-grandparents understood this, and so we are here as Jews today.

That's why we teach our children to say the Shema: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

If you want to live, be real. Know what you are willing to die for. Then you are genuinely alive, and able to truly achieve the highest form of pleasure from living.

Shakespeare said, "A coward dies many a death, a brave man dies but once." All of us are going to die. The question is, do you want to live?

by Yaakov Astor

Does Judaism believe in reincarnation?

The word eschatology is defined in the dictionary as a branch of theology concerned with the final events of the history of the world. The truth is that eschatology is not exclusively the domain of religion. The most striking example of a secular eschatology would be Marxism: the convulsions and agonies of the class war, its evils resolving themselves into the classless society, the withering of the state and the blissful existence ever after.

Jewish eschatology is made up of three basic pieces:

- The Era of the Messiah
- The Afterlife

- The World of Resurrection

The Messiah, according to traditional Jewish sources, will be a human being born of a flesh and blood mother and father, unlike the Christian idea that has him as the son of God conceived immaculately. In fact, Maimonides writes that the Messiah will complete his job and then die like everyone else.

What's his job? To end the agony of history and usher in a new era of bliss for humanity at large. The time period in which he emerges and completes his task is called the Messianic Era. According to one Talmudic opinion it's not an era of overt miracles, where the rules of nature are overturned. Rather the only new element introduced to the world will be peace among the nations, with the Jewish people living in their land under their own sovereignty, unencumbered by persecution and anti-Semitism, free to pursue their spiritual goals like never before.

The Afterlife proper is called in the traditional sources olam habah, or the World to Come. However, the same term, "olam habah," is also used to refer to the renewed utopic world of the future – the World of Resurrection, olam hat'chiah (as explained in the next paragraph). The former is the place righteous souls go to after death – and they have been going there since the first death. That place is also sometimes called the World of Souls. It's a place where souls exist in a disembodied state, enjoying the pleasures of closeness to God. Thus, genuine near death experiences are presumably glimpses into the World of Souls, the place most people think of when the term Afterlife is mentioned.

The World of Resurrection, by contrast, "no eye has seen," the Talmud remarks. It's a world, according to most authorities, where the body and soul are reunited to live eternally in a truly perfected state. That world will only first come into being after the Messiah and will be initiated by an event known as the "Great Day of Judgment,"(Yom HaDin HaGadol) The World of Resurrection is thus the ultimate reward, a place where the body becomes eternal and spiritual, while the soul becomes even more so.

In comparison to a concept like the "World To Come," reincarnation is not, technically speaking, a true eschatology. Reincarnation is merely a vehicle toward attaining an eschatological end. It's the reentry of the soul into an entirely new body into the present world. Resurrection, by contrast, is the reunification of the soul with the former body (newly reconstituted) into the "World To Come," a world history has not witnessed yet.

Resurrection is thus a pure eschatological concept. Its purpose is to reward the body with eternity (and the soul with higher perfection). The purpose of reincarnation is generally two-fold: either to make up for a failure in a previous life or to create a new, higher state of personal perfection not previously attained. The purpose of resurrection is to reward the body with eternity and the soul with higher perfection. Resurrection is thus a time of reward; reincarnation a time of repairing. Resurrection is a time of reaping; reincarnation a time of sowing.

The fact that reincarnation is part of Jewish tradition comes as a surprise to many people. Nevertheless, it's mentioned in numerous places throughout the classical texts of Jewish mysticism, starting with the preeminent sourcebook of Kabbalah, the Zohar:

As long as a person is unsuccessful in his purpose in this world, the Holy One, blessed be He, uproots him and replants him over and over again. (Zohar I 186b)

All souls are subject to reincarnation; and people do not know the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He! They do

not know that they are brought before the tribunal both before they enter into this world and after they leave it; they are ignorant of the many reincarnations and secret works which they have to undergo, and of the number of naked souls, and how many naked spirits roam about in the other world without being able to enter within the veil of the King's Palace. Men do not know how the souls revolve like a stone that is thrown from a sling. But the time is at hand when these mysteries will be disclosed. (Zohar II 99b)

The Zohar and related literature are filled with references to reincarnation, addressing such questions as which body is resurrected and what happens to those bodies that did not achieve final perfection, how many chances a soul is given to achieve completion through reincarnation, whether a husband and wife can reincarnate together, if a delay in burial can affect reincarnation, and if a soul can reincarnate into an animal.

The Bahir, attributed to the first century sage, Nechuniah ben Hakanah, used reincarnation to address the classic question of theodicy – why bad things happen to good people and vice versa:

Why is there a righteous person to whom good things happen, while [another] righteous person has bad things happen to him? This is because the [latter] righteous person did bad in a previous [life], and is now experiencing the consequences? What is this like? A person planted a vineyard and hoped to grow grapes, but instead, sour grapes grew. He saw that his planting and harvest were not successful so he tore it out. He cleaned out the sour grape vines and planted again. When he saw that his planting was not successful, he tore it up and planted it again. (Bahir 195)

Reincarnation is cited by authoritative classic biblical commentators, including Nachmanides, Menachem Recanti and Rabbenu Bachya. Among the many volumes of the holy Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, known as the "Ari," most of which come down to us from the pen of his primary disciple, Rabbi Chaim Vital, are profound insights explaining issues related to reincarnation. Indeed, his Shaar HaGilgulim, "The Gates of Reincarnation," is a book devoted exclusively to the subject, including details regarding the soul-roots of many biblical personalities and who they reincarnated into from the times of the Bible down to the Ari.

The Ari's teachings and systems of viewing the world spread like wildfire after his death throughout the Jewish world in Europe and the Middle East. If reincarnation had been generally accepted by Jewish folk and intelligentsia beforehand, it became part of the fabric of Jewish idiom and scholarship after the Ari, inhabiting the thought and writings of great scholars and leaders from classic commentators on the Talmud (for example, the Maharsha, Rabbi Moshe Eidels), to the founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, as well as the leader of the non-Chassidic world, the Vilna Gaon.

The trend continues down to this day. Even some of the greatest authorities who are not necessarily known for their mystical bent assume reincarnation to be an accepted basic tenet.

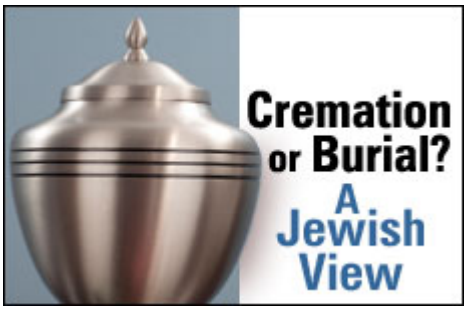
One of the texts the mystics like to cite as a scriptural allusion to the principle of reincarnation is the following verse in the Book of Job:

Behold, all these things does God do – twice, even three times with a man – to bring his soul back from the pit that he may be enlightened with the light of the living. (Job 33:29)

In other words, God will allow a person to come back to the world "of the living" from "the pit" (which is one of the

classic biblical terms for Gehenom or "Purgatory") a second and even third (or multitude of) time(s). Generally speaking, however, this verse and others are understood by mystics as mere allusions to the concept of reincarnation. The true authority for the concept is rooted in the tradition.

Excerpt from Soul Searching (Targum Press)



by Doron Kornbluth

Throughout history, societies have adopted varying approaches to dealing with corpses. Some have buried them in the ground and some have cremated them. Others sealed them away in elaborate mausoleums with food and drink, mummified them, left them for the vultures, cannibalized them and done the unthinkable to the bodies of their loved ones. Presumably, most people simply followed their neighbors' example in deciding what method to choose.

Since the very beginning of the Jewish people thousands of years ago, although many options were available, Jews have always insisted on burial.

Until recently.

Today, mirroring the developments in Western society, at least 30 percent of Jewish deaths in North America and Europe are followed by cremations, and the percentage is on the rise.

What is the cause of cremation's increasing popularity? Here are some of the top reasons:

• Environmental concerns: Burial seems to waste land and pollute the environment.

• Mobility concerns: Kids don't live close anyway. Why feel guilty about not visiting the gravesite?

• Discomfort with decomposition: Cremation seems quicker and cleaner.

• Financial concerns: Cremation seems – and often is – cheaper than burial.

As Professor Stephen Prothero put it, "whether to bury or to burn is … no trivial matter. It touches on issues as important as perceptions of the self, attitudes toward the body, views of history, styles of ritual, and beliefs in God and the afterlife."

Because this decision is so important, it is crucial not to leave it until the rushed and stressful times of ultimate grief. Let's examine the facts.

Environmentalists are not in favor of cremation.

Why? Simply because, contrary to common perception, cremation is bad for the environment.

Cremation uses a tremendous amount of fossil fuels – over one million BTUs (British thermal units) per hour with

an average cremation lasting between one and a half and two hours, sometimes more – a tremendous amount of energy at a time when, finally, society is realizing it needs to lower the use of fossil fuels.

Furthermore, cremation released toxic chemicals into the air. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency estimated in 2001 that cremations accounted for 32 percent of mercury emissions to the atmosphere in that country and a recent Canadian Study found the problem so serious that it recommended simply that "A crematorium should not be sited close to a neighborhood." Finally, there is plenty of land available for burial: When you crunch the numbers, burials in the U.S. use far less land per year than the construction of new Walmarts (187,000 square feet per Supercenter, excluding their massive parking lots). Even if all Americans were buried, it would take over 10,000 years to use up just 1% of America's land mass. And, of course, Jews constitute less than 2% of the dead, and few cemeteries would last that long anyway.

So where does this misconception come from? Environmentalists are critical of embalming chemicals and metal caskets. They recommend what are called 'green burials' without the metal caskets or embalming – and openly admire the Jewish tradition which prohibits both. Environmentalists are against cremation.

Cremation Does Not Solve Mobility Concerns

Modern mobility certainly makes cemetery visitation much harder. However, upon further reflection, things aren't so simple. First of all, it is hard to find an appropriate place for cremated remains. Feels strange to have them in the house. Even when the children do find an appropriate place for the remains of their deceased parents, how long will they keep them for?

Until they switch jobs and move? Until they retire? What will they do with them then? And when, in ten or twenty years, they are no longer living independently, will their children want the remains? Will they take them? What will they do with the remains?

The point is that our homes and families are simply not designed for long term storage of cremated remains. At some point, they are likely to be placed in an inappropriate place, forgotten, or ignored. In all cases, the home option is only temporary anyway. Some choose scattering, however in many families, a child or grandchild will eventually develop a desire to visit the gravesite and re-connect with their loved ones who have passed on. Whether important to you or not, or to the deceased, scattering prevents any descendants from ever having a traditional gravesite to visit. Even in the cases where gravesite visitation will rarely or never occur, burial is the right choice – as witnessed by the case of Moses himself, when God buried him and then hid the place of his burial (to avoid it becoming a site of idol worship). Even when it doesn't seem like there will be any visitors – the body is at rest, and has found a permanent home.

Decomposition: It's Never Pretty (Skip this section if you get queasy easily)

Many people believe cremation is quick and clean. It isn't. To quote Professor Stephen Prothero:

> *"Think of the horrors … of the crisping, crackling, roasting, steaming, shriveling, blazing features and hands that yesterday were your soul's delight. Think of exploding cadavers. Think of the stench of burning flesh and hair. Think of the smoke. Think of the bubbling brains.*
>
> *Then you will be gripped by 'paralyzing horror' at even the thought of 'submitting the remains of …*

> *dear departed relatives to its sizzling process.' Cremation [is], in a word, repulsive: 'There is nothing beautiful in being shoved in to an oven, and scientifically barbecued by a patented furnace' "*

True, being eaten by worms is not pleasant either. I'm not claiming burial is 'less gross.' On a physical level, they are both pretty disgusting. Burial, however, is a natural process of decomposition that occurs to every human being. Cremation is loud, violent, and unnatural.

Financial Concerns

Cremations have the reputation of being cheap. It isn't always so. When all the side costs and hidden costs are added in, "Sheri Richardson Stahl, director of Island Funeral Home in Beaufort, S.C., explained that, "Plenty of times, cremations are just as expensive as burials."

There is one type of cremation, however, whose costs can't be beat: direct cremation. In this type of cremation, a cremation company is contacted online or by telephone. They send someone to pick up the body, deliver it to the crematorium, and deliver to the bereaved family a small can full of cremated remains. Costs are often between $1,000 and $2,000. In an age of worldwide economic difficulty, direct cremations are becoming more common. That is unfortunate.

Here is why: For some things in life, it is certainly appropriate to find the cheapest solution possible. Times are tough, and we need to live within our means. However, for some life decisions we manage to find the money to do the right thing. For example, I will do whatever is necessary to send my children to a decent school, rather than "going cheap" and putting them in a bad environment. If a loved one needs a medical procedure, I will somehow arrange to make it possible.

Choosing burial is important. Even in the cases when it is more expensive. Here's why.

The Meaning of Burial

When a body is buried, the ground is opened up. A tear in the earth appears. The gaping hole declares, "Something is not right here – there is a tear in the human fabric of life. Take note, world, don't rush through this moment. Recognize the loss. Remember the life." When the body is gently placed in the ground, a new message is given – the calm return to nature, the source of life.

"After decades of denying our mortality, Americans are starting to accept, if not embrace, this fundamental fact of biology: that the natural end of all life is decomposition and decay. Instead of fighting it at almost all cost as we have for the better part of the last century – with toxic chemicals, bulletproof metal caskets, and the concrete bunker that is the burial vault, all of which will only delay, not halt, the inevitable – we're finally seeing the wisdom of allowing Mother Nature to run her natural course."

The earth, the dirt, is indeed "the Mother of All Life." The earth provides our sustenance, like a mother who gives birth to and feeds her young. And to it all creatures return, to begin the cycle once again. As British dramatist Francis Beaumont put it,

> Upon my buried body lay
> Lightly, gently, earth

Returning the body of someone we cared for to the earth is a sign of love. Do we burn things we love? Think back to your first pet: "We burned the trash and buried the treasure. That is why, faced with life's first lessons in mortality – the dead kitten or bunny rabbit, or dead bird fallen from its nest on high – most parents search out

shoe boxes and shovels instead of kindling wood or barbecues..."

Burial and cremation usually reflect two radically different attitudes, and two mutually exclusive ways of seeing the world and understanding our place in it. Decomposition and burning are vastly different from one another and, in many ways, complete opposites. Decomposition of

a plant or living creature creates fertilizer. The intrinsic elements of the matter are not changed – rather they are given back to the ground. No wonder that the Talmud compares burial to a type of planting.

Cremation, on the other hand, leaves only burnt ashes, its elements forever changed and almost entirely burnt off. Try burning a seed before planting it – nothing will grow. In choosing cremation, humanity shows its power, but to what end?

The message of cremation is to side with man as conqueror, using fire and technology to interfere with and control nature – rather than peacefully accept it. The message of burial is one of respect for the cycle of nature.

When burying the remains of our loved ones, we calmly return what we have received. Burial reflects the rhythm of the universe.

Furthermore, burial is a Torah commandment. Deuteronomy 21:23 discusses the rare case of an evil criminal who is put to death. Even in that extreme case, the command is given, "You shall surely bury him," teaching a general principle for all cases. The obligation to bury is so strong that even the high priest – who zealously avoided all contact with all forms of death – must personally give the dead a proper burial if no one else can do so. The Talmud, Maimonides, and the Code of Jewish Law all codify the commandment to bury the dead.

Spiritual Ramifications

The severity, repetition, and focus on providing proper Jewish burial in the Bible, Talmud, and books of Jewish law are remarkable, and hint at its important spiritual ramifications. Jewish mystical works do much more. They explain core concepts about cremation and burial that change the way we think about death – and life. In order to begin to understand the issues (a full understanding would require too much space for this article), here is a point of departure:

Who are funerals for, anyway? It sounds like a silly question, but the answer forms the basis of many decisions made at this sensitive time. Some believe that decisions made after death – for example, whether to bury or burn, and what type of service to conduct – are for the living. To give a sense of closure. To provide comfort. After all, the dead person is ... dead. Whatever we do doesn't matter to him anyway. He or she is already in a "better place." We presume that the dead don't feel what is happening to the body, don't really care, and probably aren't even aware anyway. Mourning practices, then, are understood to be for the mourners.

The Jewish view is different. While providing comfort to the bereaved is central to Jewish tradition (and is crucial to mourning practices), it is not the only factor to be considered. The soul of the departed needs to be taken into consideration as well, and some questions (what is done with the body at the time of the funeral, for instance) focus almost exclusively on the needs of the soul, rather than on the mourners' needs.

What are the (departed) soul's needs?

In Jewish thought the body and soul are not enemies. The body enables the soul to dwell in this world, to bring meaning into daily life. Without the body, the soul could not fulfill its mission. Body and soul are partners, together for a lifetime. Since they are partners, the soul becomes attached to its body. When death occurs, the soul does not depart immediately. It still feels close to the body.

Jewish mysticism compares body and soul to a loving husband and wife. When a husband departs this world, can a loving wife immediately move on? The bond is so close that time is needed to adjust to the new reality. The soul, then, does not abandon the body immediately after death. Since it is confused and disoriented, it stays close to what it knows best – its body. It hovers around the body until burial, and shares in the mourning, going back and forth from gravesite to the shivah house.

The soul is fully aware of what is happening to 'its' body.12 One way to understand this soul-knowledge is to consider that upon its departure from the physical world, the soul achieves greater closeness and knowledge of God, Who is the Source of all knowledge, and thus the soul shares in God's knowledge of what is happening to its body on earth. This is why traditional Jewish funeral practices are marked by tremendous respect for the body – it is painful for a soul to see its body mishandled, abandoned, or defiled.

Traditional Jewish burial gives the soul great comfort, and provides the transition it requires to enter the purely spiritual world. Cremation, on the other hand, causes the soul tremendous – and unnecessary – agony. The soul cries out in pain as its partner, the body, is burned rather than caringly returned to its Source. The soul is prevented from gently returning to God, instead needing to go through a lengthy and difficult struggle to adjust to a new reality.

Despite Judaism's great insistence on listening to parents and honoring their wishes, we can now understand why proper Jewish burial overrides a parental request for cremation: Once the body is dead, the soul gains greater closeness to God and therefore greater understanding. It knows what pain cremation will bring and what eternal meaning burial provides. Now, the real 'parent' – their inner soul – wants to avoid the pain and separation of cremation more than anything we can imagine.

To Die as a Jew

Finally, for thousands of years, Jews and Judaism have insisted on proper Jewish burial. Roughly 2,000 years ago, Roman historian Tacitus wrote that "the Jews bury rather than burn their dead."13 Even today, the Israel Defense Forces spends and enormous amount of time, energy, money and resources trying to ensure proper Jewish burial for its fallen. Jews will fly around the world in order to recover ancient Torah Scroll and give it a proper burial – and people are more important than even a Torah Scroll.

By choosing burial, we are aligning ourselves with Jewish history and the Jewish people. In our 'last act' on the planet, choosing Jewish burial means declaring, "I may not have been a perfect Jew. But I'm proud to be one, and I want to die as a Jew."

Adapted from Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View (Mosaica Press, 2012)

by Sara Yoheved Rigler

**If Jews believe in a blissful afterlife,
why does death cause us such inconsolable grief?**

In the Second Lebanon War, 118 Israeli soldiers and 52 Israeli civilians were killed. Each one of these deaths was experienced by the Jews of Israel as a major tragedy. Every Israeli newspaper and television station showed photographs of each one of the fallen, with a short or long description of the deceased's life, interests, hobbies, and recent statements to friends and relatives. Every funeral or shiva was televised, showing the sobbing mother, the grief-stricken father, the decimated widow, the bereft sister or brother. The television did not show its own weeping viewers.

These deaths were not only personal tragedies, but also collective calamities. Israel may be the only country in the world where, when the radio reports a military or civilian casualty, it announces the time and place of the funeral, knowing that many listeners, unacquainted with the deceased, will want to attend.

Michael Levine, 21, an idealistic American Jew, made aliyah three years ago and joined the Israeli army. On leave to visit his parents this summer, he was in Philadelphia when the war broke out. Although his leave was good for a few more weeks, Michael came rushing back to Israel to contribute his share.

He was killed in action in Lebanon. Michael's funeral at the Mt. Herzl Military Cemetery was attended by many hundreds of mourners. They were Jews from across the religious and political spectrum. The only two things most of them had in common were that they had never met Michael and that they cried copiously at his burial.

My own grief at Michael's death (I, too, had never known him) reminded me of a story I had read many years ago. The son of a Christian missionary who worked in what was then called the Belgian Congo wrote lovingly about his father. When Congolese rebels took over the capitol, they imprisoned his father and other missionaries. The Mother Superior of a local Catholic convent was the only white-skinned person permitted to visit the jailed missionaries. Every morning the families of the imprisoned telephoned the Mother Superior to inquire about the welfare of their husbands and fathers.

One night, machete-wielding rebels burst into the jail cell and hacked to death all the missionaries. The next morning this particular son, unaware of the atrocity, telephoned the Mother Superior and inquired how his father was.

"He's fine," she answered. "He's in heaven."

When I first read this story, my gut reaction to the Mother Superior's answer was: A Jew would never have answered like that. But why? I wondered.

At the time I had never studied Torah and had only the vaguest notion of the Jewish concept of the afterlife. In the afternoon and evening Hebrew school I had attended, I had heard Hasidic stories about "the heavenly tribunal" assigning souls to heaven or hell. So, I surmised, Jews

must believe in heaven, but I had never once heard any Jew mention it. I was a child when my Uncle Harry died at the age of 42. Judging by my family's inconsolable crying, I concluded that death was the terrible end of the story, without any comforting epilogue.

Years later when I read the Mother Superior's sanguine response to the missionary's massacre, I wondered why we Jews react to death with such prostrate grief rather than with some high-minded, philosophical stoicism. Don't we also believe in heaven?

The Highest Heaven

Now I've studied enough Judaism to know that Michael Levine is in heaven. According to Judaism, heaven is a wholly spiritual dimension of reality where souls receive a wholly spiritual reward: to bask in the radiance of the Divine Presence. The myriad "levels" of heaven mean ever greater proximity to the Divine Light.

Michael Levine is in the highest heaven, with the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Talmud relates the episode of the "tzaddikim (righteous) of Lod." A Roman officer was assassinated by Jews in the vicinity of the village of Lod. The Romans declared that if the assassins did not come forward, every Jew in the village would be executed. Two brothers who had nothing to do with the murder confessed and allowed themselves to be killed in order to spare the other Jews of Lod. The Talmud asserts that these two "tzaddikim of Lod," who were previously unremarkable for their piety or wisdom, gained a place in the Next World with the Patriarchs. The inference is that any Jew who dies to protect other Jews similarly qualifies for that highest level of heaven.

Yet, I am sure, not a single mourner watching Michael's Israeli flag draped coffin lowered into the grave thought, "He's fine. He's in heaven." Why not?

For a Few Pennies

Ethics of the Fathers, the aphorisms of the sages of 2,000 years ago, defines the difference between this world and the Next World: "Better is one hour of repentance and good deeds 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]

In other words, the Next World is the locus for receiving reward, and none of the pleasure of this world is remotely comparable to the bliss of the Next World. On the other hand, this world is the locus for choosing to do good, which is somehow better than receiving even the most blissful reward in the Next World.

The Gaon of Vilna was the greatest Torah luminary of the last few centuries. On his deathbed at the end of a long and saintly life, the Gaon of Vilna wept. When his family asked him why, he replied, "Here in this world, for a few pennies I can purchase tzitzis [ritual fringes Jewish men wear on a four-cornered garment]." All the bliss of heaven was not enough to console the sage for the loss of the opportunity to do one mitzvah.

The Jew's primary focus is on this world because only here can a soul choose good. Only in this world can a person opt to fulfill the Divine will. Only in this world can a person give God the "gift" of obeying His word. The Next World is for receiving. This world is for giving. When we give, we become like God, the Ultimate Giver. Little wonder that Judaism places supreme value on this world.

Although the performance of every mitzvah automatically generates a reward in the Next World, the wise know that the goal of doing the mitzvah is not the reward. Rather, the value of the mitzvah is inherent in the act of choosing to do good, irrespective of the reward. The esteemed Rabbi Noah Weinberg, the dean of Aish HaTorah, illustrates this sublime concept with a metaphor:

Let's say you are performing the mitzvah of honoring parents by serving your mother a glass of water. A man witnessing your deed tells you, "What a wonderful thing you just did! You honored your mother! Here's $100,000 reward."

You would likely tell the man that you didn't do it for the reward, but, since he's offering, you graciously accept the $100,000. The next time you serve your mother a glass of water, the scene repeats. Again, you didn't do it for the money, but nevertheless you accept the reward. This scene repeats itself ten times.

The 11th time you're serving your mother a class of water, out of the corner of your eye you see the man holding the cash. What are you thinking about? Certainly not the mitzvah of honoring your mother! You're thinking about the $100,000!

This is equivalent to performing mitzvot and good deeds in order to receive a heavenly reward.

But Rabbi Weinberg describes another scenario: Let's say that you and your two-year-old child are standing beside a pool, and the toddler accidentally falls in. Of course, you jump into the pool, even with all your clothes on, and save your child. A man witnessing your deed tells you, "What a wonderful thing you just did! Here's $1,000,000 reward."

You would likely tell the man that you didn't do it for the reward, but, since he's offering, you graciously accept the $1,000,000. A short time later, the scene repeats. Again you jump in and save your toddler. Again the man offers you $1,000,000, and although you didn't do it for the money, nevertheless you accept the reward. This scene repeats itself ten times.

The 11th time your child falls into the pool, out of the corner of your eye you see the man holding the cash. What are you thinking about? SAVING YOUR CHILD!

Some acts have such intrinsic value, obvious even to our limited human perception, that no amount of reward can distract us from the value of the act itself.

The wise know that every mitzvah is worth more than its reward. "Fulfilling the will of the Almighty," asserts Rabbi Weinberg, "is an end in itself. We Jews are not looking to get into heaven, but to turn this earth into heaven. Every time we die, we fail."

That's why we cried at the death of Michael Levine. Yes, he merited the highest level of heaven. Yes, he is now basking in the bliss of the Divine Presence. Yes, even if he had lived another 60 years, he could not have earned a greater reward than what he got for dying in order to protect the lives of other Jews. But had he lived, he could have (and would have) served his mother a glass of water. He could have made Kiddush on Shabbat. He could have given charity to the needy. And these acts, possible only in this physical world, are meaningful and precious beyond reward.

"Better is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than the whole life of the World-to-Come." Jews do believe in heaven. But we are charged with making this world into heaven, and that heaven of our own minute-by-minute choices, of our own hourly struggle, of our own daily striving, is infinitely precious. And the loss of those days and hours and minutes in anyone's life is infinitely tragic.

No wonder we weep.

by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan

One of the foundations of our faith is the belief in the immortality of the soul, and in life after death.

If one believes in God's justice, one must also believe in the immortality of the soul. How can we otherwise reconcile the fact that many righteous individuals suffer in this life?

Just as the unborn child has many endowments which are of no use to it in the womb, but demonstrate that it will be born into a world where they will be used, so does a human being have many endowments which are of little value in this life, which indicate that man will be reborn into a higher dimension after death.

Details of immortality are not mentioned in the Torah since revelation only deals with the present world. The prophet therefore says when speaking of the World to Come, "Never has the ear heard it – no eye has seen it – other than God: That which He will do for those who hope in Him" (Isaiah 64:3). That is, not even the great prophets were allowed to envision the reward of the righteous in the Ultimate future.

Man shares physio-chemical life processes with animals, and on the physical plane is indistinguishable from them. We therefore speak of man having an "animal soul" (Nefesh HaBehamit) which is contained in the blood, i.e. in the physio-chemical life processes. Regarding this soul, the Torah says, "The life-force of the flesh is in the blood" (Leviticus 17:11).

Since this animal soul is what draws man away from the spiritual, it is commonly called the "Evil Urge" (Yetzer Hara) in the Talmud.

Innermost Essence

In addition to his material self, however, man possesses a soul which is unique among all of God's creations. In describing the creation of Adam, the Torah says, "God formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils a soul-breath of life (Nishmat Chaim). Man [thus] became a living creature (Nefesh Chaya)" (Genesis 2:7).

The Torah is teaching us that the human soul came directly from God's innermost Essence in the same way that a breath issues forth from a person's lungs and chest cavity. The rest of creation, on the other hand, was created with speech, which is a lower level, for just as sound waves are generated by a person but do not contain any air from the lungs, so the rest of creation emanates from God's Power but not from His Essence.

Three Parts

The soul consists of three parts which are called by the Hebrew names, nefesh, ruach and neshama. The word neshama is a cognate of nesheema, which means literally "breath." Ruach means "wind." Nefesh comes from the root nafash, meaning "rest," as in the verse, "On the seventh day, [God] ceased work and rested (nafash)." (Exodus 31:17).

God's exhaling a soul can be compared to a glassblower forming a vessel. The breath (neshama) first leaves his lips, travels as a wind (ruach) and finally comes to rest (nefesh) in the vessel. Of these three levels of the soul, neshama is therefore the highest and closes to God, while nefesh is that aspect of the soul residing in the body. Ruach stands between the two, binding man to his spiritual Source. It is for this reason that Divine Inspiration is called Ruach HaKodesh in Hebrew.

The neshama is affected only by thought, the ruach by speech, and the nefesh by action.

Decomposition of the Body

All souls were created at the beginning of time, and are stored in a celestial treasury until the time of birth.

The soul has its first attachment to the body from the moment of conception, and remains with it until the moment of death. Death is thus often referred to in Hebrew as "departure of the soul" (Yetziat HaNeshama).

We are taught that immediately after death the soul is in a state of great confusion. It is therefore customary to stay near a dying person, so that he not die alone.

The disembodied soul is intensely aware of the physical surroundings of its body. This is especially true before the body is buried. The soul then literally mourns for its body for seven days. This is alluded to in the verse, "His soul mourns for him" (Job 14:22).

For the first 12 months after death, until the body decomposes, the soul has no permanent resting place and thus experiences acute disorientation. It therefore hovers over the body. During this time, the soul is aware of and identifies with the decomposition of the body. The Talmud thus teaches us that "Worms are as painful to the dead as needles in the flesh of the living, as it is written (Job 14:22), 'His flesh grieves for him'." Most commentaries write that this refers to the psychological anguish of the soul in seeing its earthly habitation in a state of decay. The Kabbalists call this Chibut HaKever, "punishment of the grave."

We are taught that what happens to the body in the grave can be even more painful than Gehenom. This experience is not nearly as difficult for the righteous, however, since they never consider their worldly body overly important.

Eternal Reward

This is part of the judgment of the soul which occurs during the first year after death. Aside from this, the souls of the wicked are judged for 12 months after death, while others are judged for a lesser time.

It is for this reason that the Kaddish is said for the first 11 months in order not to depict him as an evildoer. For this same reason, when mentioning a parent's name during the first year after death, one should say, "May I be an atonement for his/her resting place" (Hareini Kapparat Mishkavo/a).

The main judgment after death is in Gehenom, where the soul is cleansed in a spiritual fire, and purified so that it can receive its eternal reward.

The souls of the righteous are able to progress higher and higher in the spiritual dimension. Regarding this, the prophet was told, "If you go in My ways... then I will give you a place to move among [the angels] standing here" (Zechariah 3:7). God was showing the prophet a vision of stationary angels, and telling him that he would be able to move among them. While angels are bound to their particular plane, man can move and progress from level to level. This is also alluded to in the verse, "The dust

returns to the dust as it was, but the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

Some authorities maintain that what the sages called Olam Haba (the "Future World" or "World to Come") refers to the spiritual dimension that the soul enters after leaving the body. The majority, however, consider Olam Haba as a completely new stage of earth life which will be ushered in only after the Messianic Age and the Resurrection of the Dead. According to these authorities, all souls pass into an intermediate dimension called Olam HaNeshamot ("World of Souls") after death. It is there that they are judged and then abide until the resurrection and final judgment.

From "The Handbook of Jewish Thought" (Vol. 2), Maznaim Publishing

Yael Mermelstein

I often wonder on which side of the moral fence I would have stood during the Holocaust. Would I have been one amongst the myriads of unsung heroes, sharing my last morsel with someone even weaker than I was? Or would I have become one of the notorious kapos, exploiting my brothers' misfortunes to save my own hide? Would I have used my position in the Judenrat to further only my own survival, or the survival of others as well?

I think it is impossible to decide conclusively where one might have stood, without ever having set foot in the inferno.

Each person has a deep reservoir of untapped possibility within them. Sometimes that potential can lie fallow forever. But once in a good long while, you get an unrestricted view deep inside your own well, and you see that wading down in the gloom is a pinpoint of light, luminous as a beacon.

I remember one of those times.

Way back in high school, I had a special friend named Rachel. I met Rachel through an organization I volunteered with, helping to enrich the lives of people with special needs. Rachel was mentally and physically disabled. She realized that her social life was not up to par with that of a "normal" seventeen year old. My heart ached for her and we decided to meet for lunch each week in my high school cafeteria. After a time, people got used to her presence, and for just a few moments each week, Rachel was able to stand at the periphery of normal high school existence, almost – just almost – blending in.

Our weekly meetings augmented my own life as much as they enhanced hers. Her sanguinity, coupled with her unpretentious appreciation of just being alive, helped to keep my teen-age angst at bay.

And so it went, week in and week out, every Tuesday.

One Tuesday, Rachel and I sat over bagels and chocolate milk. I was leaning in to pick the soft strains of her voice

out of the cacophony when the fire alarm bells suddenly clanged into our conversation like an unwanted visitor.

I startled, then sighed. A fire drill. I would have to get special permission to use the elevator with Rachel. She had full braces on both of her legs and she walked with crutches.

That's when I saw Ms. Kapnes running out of the teachers' room, screaming "Fire!" Then I smelled the smoke. Drills went up in a puff of smoke as the student body went running wildly for the stairs. My heart was drumming to some alternate rhythm, as I sat, rooted, helpless, wondering.

I looked at Rachel, her eyes were wide, questioning, begging.

"You go," she said. "I can't do it."

The spring released and I moved.

"I'm not leaving without you." The voice came up from deep within my well. I didn't recognize the cadence.

"But I can't do it, it's impossible. I'll take the elevator."

I had learned enough about fire safety to know that we were not going that route. I smelled the smoke and I felt, or perhaps imagined, the prickle of heat at my skin.

I was experiencing the raw fear of death. But she was my responsibility; I had no choice.

Then I looked at the door. Maybe I did have a choice. In my mind, my body was running out those doors, while in reality, my feet were embedded in the cafeteria floor.

And so, it seemed that I had made my choice.

I hoisted Rachel up and looked around wildly. Most of the room had emptied. Then, from behind me came Sarah, a teenage angel.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll help you."

She took Rachel's arm and slung it around her neck. "You take the other arm," she instructed me. I followed dumbly. "Now, together – we walk."

Some of Sarah's overflowing strength poured into my well.

"Rachel, you can do this." I knew that she had upper body strength. "We can make it out. You just need to focus all of your energy into your arms, and haul yourself up these steps."

Rachel seemed grateful for our confidence. I was grateful for Sarah's confidence. We slowly began our ascent, each step an obstacle that could only be conquered through strength, perseverance and love.

"It's okay," Sarah whispered gently to Rachel, when she stopped to catch her breath. "You're doing great."

"Just a bit longer," I urged her along, though the sunlight had never seemed further away.

And then something incredible happened.

Somewhere along the way, somewhere between the basement and the first floor, somewhere between heaven and earth, a transformation occurred. I let go of my fear and held on to my goal. The here and now, each breath we took, became valuable in and of itself. This survival struggle was inherently beautiful, the outcome less significant. The greatest value of life was being expressed

at that very moment, in one pure act of giving. Our struggle had become larger than life itself. No flames could burn more ardently than the three burning souls trudging up that stairwell.

And it was then that I caught a glimmer of the lives of true heroes. Those Jews that had smuggled food across the barbed wire fence into the ghettos and those gentiles who had harbored Jewish fugitives at great risk to their own lives. They chose to extend themselves beyond the normal urge for self preservation. With the world around them so base, it took a whole lot more than common decency to fortify themselves against the opposing forces. It was their choice to catch sight of that luminescent flare within their wells.

And once they denounced evil and chose to fill their lives with goodness, at any expense, the pleasure must have been all theirs. The struggle for survival paled when compared to the struggle to do what was most honorable.

Rachel waved her crutch up in the air in accomplishment when we finally reached the street.

"I did it!" she said.

"You did!" Sarah hugged her.

I did it too! I thought to myself.

And it was good to know.

by Rabbi Benjamin Blech

What matters most is maximizing our life before death.

Recently there's been a spate of new books presenting what the authors consider an unshakable case for the survival of consciousness beyond death, drawn from quantum mechanics, neuroscience and moral philosophy.

But I have to confess that having the inside information Judaism gave me – long before the publication of these new findings that claim to know what happens after our "full life of 120" – is far more satisfying than the most compelling and supposedly scientific validity for belief in an afterlife.

True, Jewish tradition never emphasized or even went into great detail about the specifics of the World to Come. It was simply a given, a fact rooted, as biblical commentators explained, in the notion that we are created "in the image of God." Since God is eternal, there is something within every one of us – the Divine essence that represents our identity and that we refer to as our souls – that must of necessity be equally eternal and immortal.

Our bodies, as material creations, came from the dust of the earth and have to return to their source; they disintegrate when they are buried. But our souls are the

gift of "Himself" that the Almighty breathed into us. They accompany us in our journey through life and do not forsake us with the end of our physical beings.

Judaism did not dwell on the obvious. Sure there is life after death; without it life would be rendered a transient flash in the pan, perhaps fun while it lasted but ultimately devoid of meaning. The Torah recorded the past as history; it chose to leave the future as mystery. Its purpose was primarily to be a "tree of life" concerned with teaching us how to improve ourselves and our world while we inhabit it. The details of our post-terrestrial existence were in the main left unrecorded. There will be time enough for us to discover the Divine master plan for the World to Come – once we get there.

But if we are to lead our lives with the proper sense of responsibility and purpose, there are some things that the Sages realized we have to know about. So they did give us a peek into the future after our deaths.

At the moment of death, we catch a glimpse of God. The Torah teaches us that God decreed, "No man can see me and live" (Exodus 33:20). The implication is clear: with the end of life we are granted the gift of a minute vision of the Almighty. That is the reason, many commentators suggest, that we are obligated to close the eyes of the deceased. The eyes that have now beheld God Himself must be shut off from any further contact with the profane.

And it is this momentary meeting that serves to give meaning to all of our lives. We suddenly grasp that everything we have ever done or said was in the presence of a Higher Power. Everything we accomplished or failed to do was judged by the One Who created us. "Know before whom you are destined to give a final accounting" is the language of the Talmud. Can there be a greater incentive to do good and not evil than the knowledge that in the end it is God Who will pass judgment on whether we were a success or a failure?

In Kabbalah, the mystics add a small piece to the story. It is not only God who judges us. As we bid farewell to the world, we are shown a film that contains scenes of our entire lives. We are witnesses to every moment of our days on Earth as they pass before us with incredible rapidity. And as we watch our own story unfold, there are times when we cringe with embarrassment; others when we smile with glee. Our past moral lapses cause us to shudder in pain; our victories over our evil inclinations provide us with a keen sense of spiritual triumph. It is then that we realize in retrospect that we alone are the greatest judges of our own lives. What happens after death is that we gain the wisdom to evaluate our own life by the standards of Heaven – because we have finally glimpsed an eternal perspective.

The Eternal, Here and Now

There is a synagogue in Jerusalem with a most unusual architectural feature. Built into one of the walls facing the congregants is a coffin. When I visited and remarked upon this seemingly morbid addition, one of the elders explained to me that this was a tradition their community maintained for many centuries. It had its roots in an effort to remind everyone of the cardinal truth that, being mortal, we are all destined someday to face our Maker. No one is exempt from the final judgment. To place this in the forefront of our consciousness every day, he smilingly said to me, is not morbid but surely a mitzvah.

No, we do not need to know the details of the World to Come. But we must constantly be aware of the reality that our days will be scrutinized by a Higher Authority – and that we ourselves will be forced to join in the Divine judgment.

There is no clear picture painted for us of Heaven and Hell. While belief in reward and punishment after death is, according to Maimonides, one of the 13 major principles of our faith, we have no way of knowing exactly what is meant by this concept. But we can hazard a guess. Since our entry into the next world is preceded by the obligation for every one of us to watch the film record of our lives, what greater Hell can there be than for us to have to acknowledge our shameful actions and our unconscionable failings unto all eternity? And what greater Heaven can there be than the ability to look back forever on personal acts of goodness, of charity, and of noble and pious behavior that made us find favor in the eyes of God?

That's why it's so important for us to affirm that death isn't the end. And even if we don't know exactly how our souls will be treated either above or below, we have been assured that the righteous are guaranteed rewards commensurate with their good deeds, and the wicked will rue the evil they perpetrated.

What is Hell? Remember when you were in eighth grade and something utterly embarrassing happened? The shame you felt and how you just wanted the ground to open up so you could disappear. That is Hell. It is the deepest realization that our life (or part of it) has been squandered, which creates a deep regret and shame in our soul.

The good news is that God – in His infinite kindness – established this as a cleansing process, where after one year (or less), all the negativity has been forever washed away.

Closing the Curtain

So why think about what happens after death while we're still here? The answer is simple and at the same time most profound: Whatever actions we take on Earth must be with a sense of their eternal ramification.

Perhaps it's best reflected in the following story. A very wealthy man not known for his piety stood in a long line of those waiting to have their lives assessed by the heavenly court. He listened attentively as those who were being judged before him recounted both their spiritual failings and achievements. A number of them seemed to have the scales weighted against them until they suddenly remembered acts of charity they had performed, which dramatically tipped the scales in their favor. The rich man took it all in and smiled to himself.

When it was his turn, he confidently said, “I may have committed many sins during my lifetime, but I realize now what has the power to override them. I am a very wealthy man and I will be happy to write out a very large check to whatever charity you recommend.”

To which the court replied, “We are truly sorry, but here we do not accept checks – only receipts.”

The true tragedy of death is that it represents the closing curtain on our ability to do anymore mitzvot. We no longer have the free will to do good (or evil). It is only what we bring to that moment that can earn us entry into a state of eternal bliss. It's what we do here and now that truly matters. The choices we make today create our portion in the Next World. For eternity.

Death isn't a destroyer; it's a transition. As the chassidic Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk put it, “Death is just a matter of going from one room to another. And if we live our lives in accord with the will of God, we are certain that the place we are going to is ultimately the more beautiful area.”

Yes, there is life after death. But the greatest afterlife is achieved by focusing on how we can maximize our life before death.