

Life After Death

Yizkor 5774

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We have come to our beloved Temple to seek comfort in this sacred hour of memory. We are here, for we are bereaved. We mourn the loss of parents, who gave us life and taught us how to live. We shed a tear for a spouse, who shared our life in so many ways, both precious and mundane. We grieve for a child, God forbid, who was our promise of tomorrow. We are bereft of a sister or a brother, a grandparent, a precious member of our extended family, a life-long friend. We feel our loved one's absence keenly. The emptiness at our side is palpable. She should be here, sitting next to me at worship. He should have been with me, tasting the apples and honey on Rosh Hashanah. How empty the holidays feel without the loving phone call, the l'shanah tovah greeting across the miles.

We seek solace in our prayers. We look for comfort in a congregation of mourners; none of us is alone. We search for peace in our blessed memories.

In other houses of worship, comfort in the loss of a loved one is derived primarily from faith in life after death. In most Christian churches, belief in life everlasting is frequently articulated and widely accepted. In the wake of bereavement, the expectation of heaven is a magnificent source of healing.

Most Jews, though, are frustrated when our Christian friends ask us about our own faith in eternal life. Some of us have an answer ready, but most stammer through an attempted explanation. Most Jews know very little of our own religious teaching about life after death. Our ignorance makes interfaith dialogue difficult; but worse, we are missing a potential well-spring of hope in the aftermath of our own loss.

We are familiar with the teaching of Classical Reform Judaism, so beautifully stated in the Union Prayer Book: "Our beloved, whom we now remember, have entered into the peace of life eternal. They live on in the acts of goodness they performed, and in the hearts of those who cherish and revere their memories."

We tend to focus on the second sentence. The message is powerful, it is rational, and it is indisputably true. Our deceased loved ones are very much alive in their goodness, which death can never destroy. Their impact on this world, whether large or small, does yet touch lives, even now that they are gone. They do still live in our hearts.

This rational faith of Reform Judaism can comfort us even further, as we consider its implications. We are offered a role in assuring our loved ones' immortality. If we will smile, as he once did, then his joy will live, here on Earth. If we will unite the family, which was always her role, then her values can never die. If we will alleviate the suffering of the poor and oppressed, the sick and the lonely, as she once did, then her goodness yet lives.

But what of that first sentence of our statement of faith: "Our beloved, whom we now remember, have entered into the peace of life eternal." What exactly does that mean to us?

Perhaps those words merely suggest entering eternal sleep, which is peaceful. Many among us derive comfort from the faith that our loved ones live on, here on Earth, and otherwise believe that, when we die, we die, with no expectation of everlasting life for the individual. Some among us will accept no faith that cannot be rationally proven; blessedly, many who think this way find solace nonetheless.

Our Jewish tradition, though, does teach us that we live on, in God's domain, even after we have died. Hebrew has at least three words that mean "soul:" *nefesh*, *neshamah*, and *ruach*. Each of these words also means "breath." The Rabbis taught that, when we breathe out our last, the breath that leaves us is our immortal soul.

The human being, as described in the second chapter of Genesis, is created from the dust of the Earth; dust we are, and to dust shall we return. "Dust" was ancient people's way of describing the collection of atoms, the chemicals that make up our body and every other physical thing in the universe. But we are more than that dust; we are not merely the chemicals of which we are composed. Torah tells us that God has breathed a *neshamah*, an immortal soul, the breath of life, into us. When we die, the *neshamah* returns to God.

Where do our souls go? Technically, we Jews don't use the word "heaven" to describe the abode of the dead. Our words are more ephemeral: *olam haba*, the world to come; or the Garden of Eden. When we die, the immortal part of us will rejoice forever with God, and with the souls of all the dead, in Paradise.

What will it look like? Our Rabbis teach us that we should not spend too much time speculating on the specific nature of the world to come. These rabbis believed in bodily resurrection. The sages taught that, after the Messiah comes, our corpses will be resurrected from the grave, flesh will cling to our bones once again, and our souls will reunite with our bodies. One could explore this teaching to the point of absurdity. Will I be resurrected with the body I have at the time of my death, or at the prime of my life? Will I have my hair once again? Will I get my figure back? Judaism almost always encourages us to question, but the Rabbis discouraged investigation into the details of life after death. The ancient Rabbis' beliefs in afterlife ranged from bodily resurrection to *gilgulei hanefashot*, the recycling of souls, more commonly called "reincarnation." We are required to believe none of them. Perhaps that's why we often do such a poor job explaining the Jewish view of life after death.

Please do not think that I have offered you today an exhaustive lecture on Jewish teachings about afterlife. For a fuller explanation, I can suggest an excellent book, *What Happens After I Die?* Judaism offers us a wide variety of afterlife teachings. We are free to accept them all, for they need not be mutually exclusive. Others of us will remain quietly skeptical.

Ultimately, in the face of death, Judaism teaches us to live our lives and to do God's will by performing mitzvot. Whatever else will happen, we will live on here on Earth. Our lives do have an impact on God's creation. During our lifetimes, we are to concern ourselves with the redemption of the entire universe. God will take care of us, individually, one by one, as we die.

And so today, as we gather to mourn, let us draw strength from the beauty of our Temple and the wisdom of Torah. May we find comfort in our Jewish teachings of life after death. May we find solace in the work that remains before us, here on Earth.

Let us live, and one day die, with the faith that God is always with us. Living or dead, God is at our side. We are never alone.

Amen.