

Summary of Jewish Views of the Afterlife by Simcha Paul Raphael
Summary by Rabbi Dr. Barry Leff

There is no single, authoritative Jewish position or doctrine on the afterlife. With the Shulchan Aruch there was a definitive codification of halacha; there is no similar work which codifies Jewish eschatological beliefs. It is interesting to note that in a survey taken in 1965 only 17% of Jews believed in an afterlife; the rest either didn't, or admitted to not knowing.

The book discusses the sources for a lot of customs we have today, but doesn't really come up with a simple statement of what would be considered normative Judaism's views on the afterlife today. What I think is "accepted" by mainstream Judaism is probably a simplification of the concepts elaborated on in kabbalistic and chassidic texts. The mainstream today has inherited from Maimonides (Rambam) the rationalist philosophy that there is a vast gulf between the things we know about in the physical realm, and the things we can't directly know about in the spiritual realm, and therefore speculation about the spiritual realm is idle. Very similar to his views on God: absolute faith that God exists, but also an ardent belief that we cannot fathom the nature of God, or describe God as long as we dwell in the physical realm. This acceptance of an Aristotelian, rationalist world view has served to downplay speculation on spiritual matters in the contemporary Jewish community.

The following describes what I think even the rationalistic normative Judaism of today would accept as the "Jewish metaphor" for what happens after death:

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

You may be surprised that I included a belief in physical resurrection as part of what would be considered normative Judaism today. The reason I include it is that belief in resurrection is one of Rambam's thirteen principles of faith, which we recite as part of our liturgy in Yigdal, which is certainly still considered mainstream today.

The history and some of the embellishments are quite interesting:

Biblical sources

The earliest biblical sources give only rather vague concepts of the afterlife. Sheol is discussed as an underground domain of the dead, neither good or bad, and beyond the care and control of God. According to the ancient three tiered biblical world view, God was in the heavenly realm, men on earth, and dead in Sheol. It is not a region of the wicked and punishment; it's simply where the dead hang out. Rich and poor, kings and sinners, all went to Sheol when they died. Various descriptions in Daniel, Job, and Proverbs paint a picture of a bleak and forlorn subterranean realm. A number of other terms, Abaddon, Bor, and Shakhbat are used for Sheol. The residents of Sheol are called Rephaim, "ghosts," or literally "weak or powerless ones." In Isaiah and Job we find statements like "They are dead, they can never live. Rephaim can never rise." Death was not seen as an annihilation of existence, but as a reduction in energy. The nefesh, which is the life force or energy (chi) is seen as existing on a continuum from full power (life) to sickness, which is a weakened state, to death, which is the lowest ebb.

The view of Sheol grew over time. As God moved from being the God of Israel to being God of the entire world, his power extended to Sheol as well. In Psalm 49:15 this expansion of power is shown where it says "But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, and will receive me." In the early view of Sheol, the living could call on the inhabitants for help, e.g., King Saul summons Samuel for guidance. Later texts in Job, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes show the dead in Sheol being completely cut off from the world and unaware of what happens there.

In the sixth century BCE, after Israel had suffered numerous military calamities, Sheol started to be seen as a realm of divine retribution. In Isaiah and Ezekiel there is talk of the enemies of Israel being cast down to Sheol as retribution. At this point it is a collective retribution for the nations and kings that were wicked to us, not individual retribution.

Shortly afterwards, in the Book of Jeremiah, the notion of individual responsibility and retribution enters Jewish thought. The concept is clarified in Ezekiel: "The person who sins, he alone shall die. A child shall not share the burden of a parent's guilt, nor shall a parent share the burden of a child's guilt; the righteousness of the righteous shall be accounted to him alone, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be accounted to him alone." (Ezekiel 18:20). At this point, note that the rewards are in this world: the righteous continue to live, and the wicked die and go down to Sheol. It's not until the Book of Job where the notion of a divine reward beyond the grave is first discussed. Job professes the belief that after all his suffering, after "his skin is peeled away" he will see God (Do you suppose he has some harsh questions in mind for that time when he sees God?).

Notwithstanding the rabbis later midrashic struggle to find sources for a belief in resurrection in the Pentateuch, the first clear descriptions of resurrection are in Ezekiel (6th c. BCE), in his famous vision of the valley of dry bones coming to life. In Isaiah, Sheol becomes a waiting place for the righteous, where they pass their time waiting to be resurrected. In Daniel, 2nd c. BCE, the wicked will be punished, and the righteous will be rewarded in post mortem judgement. From this point on, post mortem judgement and resurrection are essential components of the Jewish view of the afterlife.

Heaven and Hell in Apocryphal literature

During 200 BCE to 200 CE in Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphic texts the complexity of the afterlife grows. Sheol becomes a realm with distinct areas for the righteous and the wicked. The dualistic concept of the afterlife develops, with Sheol or Gehenna being the destination for the wicked, and Paradise or Heaven the destination for the righteous. The concept of Paradise is first encountered in 1 Enoch, which is pseudepigraphic, dating from the 3rd c. BCE. The word Gehenna comes from Gei Hinnom, the Valley of Hinnom, referred to in Joshua and Jeremiah as a place where idolatrous child sacrifices were offered to Moloch. Even though these sources aren't part of the official canon, there are many places where ideas expressed there found their way into rabbinic interpretations of Olam Ha Ba, as well as in medieval midrash and kabbalah.

Rabbinic Judaism

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

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

One split worth noting is that in views of the afterlife we have come from the Pharisees: the Sadducees had a very different view. The Sadducees completely rejected the concepts of postmortem reward and punishment, and with a belief in bodily resurrection. They taught that the soul completely ceased its existence at the time of death. According to Josephus, “The Sadducees...take away faith entirely, and suppose that God is not concerned in our doing or not doing what is evil; and they say, that to act what is good, or what is evil, is at men’s own choice, and that the one or the other belongs to every one, that they may act as they please. They also take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards of Sheol.” Regarding the Pharisees, Josephus says “they believe that souls have an immortal vigor in them...[and the] power to revive and live again.” In the gospels we see how Jesus, a product of first century Judaism, tacitly accepted the pharisaic belief in a resurrection of the dead for all humanity. The Pharisees quickly squashed any heresies such as denying the resurrection of the dead from the minds of even informed writers.

In the early mishnaic (talmudic) texts, Olam Ha-Ba is an era at the end of days when divine judgement will be meted out and many will be brought back to physical life. They are not talking about an immortal spiritual realm. They talk about some who will be denied a place in the World to Come, e.g., 3 kings of Israel, Jeroboam, Ahab, and Manasseh; the generation of the Flood, the men of Sodom, the generation of the wilderness, the spies who reported back to the Israelites wandering in the desert, and even those who deny that the resurrection of the dead is prescribed by the Torah(!). There is not much discussion in the Mishnah on the nature of the afterlife realm; the focus is on the ethical behavior required to merit participation in the World to Come. In this period, the World to Come is presented as simply an improved version of This World: a place of righteousness, social justice, and material prosperity. There is wine, food, and children without effort.

Around the 2nd c. BCE there were occasional sages who would talk of Olam Ha-Ba has a realm where immortal souls went immediately upon death, but theirs was a minority view which never took hold.

The concept of judgement, both collective and individual, was central to their views of Olam Ha-Ba. There are passages that talk about God judging Israel, and also sitting with the elders of Israel and judging the gentile nations. Individual judgement is shown in M. Avot, “You will in Olam Ha-Ba have to give account and reckoning before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy Blessed One.” In other places, it describes how the individual will have a review of his life, and the righteous will merit Gan Eden and the wicked are punished in Gehenna.

The rabbis had a diverse range of ideas about what happened at death and just after: they taught that 903 different kinds of death existed in the world, the most difficult and painful due to a form of choking, and the easiest like a kiss, “like drawing a hair out of milk.” They repeatedly leave little doubt that the way to an easy painless death is to lead a righteous life. The Angel of Death, Malakh Ha-Mavet, which appears at the time of death, is a rabbinic invention, although there are precursor examples of destroying angels, etc., in Torah and Tanakh. They taught that one could elude the Angel of Death through continuous fervent study of Torah. Other angelic beings also become involved in the death process, including Dumah, the caretaker of the souls.

The rabbinic period first sees the idea of suffering the pains of the grave as a way of atoning for sins. There were debates about whether the dead could hear what was going on in the world of the living. There is a saying in the Talmud that the lips of a sage move in his grave when someone says a teaching or halacha in his name. There’s a story of a man who overhears two spirits conversing and takes advantage of the knowledge he gains from it. Necromancy, attempting to converse with the dead was strictly forbidden. (Some said it was phony; most just said it was forbidden).

In the midrash, it talks about the soul spending three days trying to get back into the body, but giving up when it sees the body starting to decay; another midrash says during the seven days of mourning the soul goes back and forth between its “sepulchral abode” and its former home.

Gehanna becomes clearly a realm of punishment; in some places it is created on the second day of creation, in another it is one of the seven things created before the world. Threat of punishment in Gehanna was used by rabbinic leaders as a way to get the average person to obey mitzvot (precursor to the “hell and damnation” preachers of today!). A variety of sins were thought to bring upon oneself punishment in Gehanna even if you were otherwise righteous and a scholar. Some of the sins that brought on punishment in Gehanna included incest, adultery, idolatry, pride, losing one’s temper, teaching a student who is not worthy, and—get this—following the advice of one’s wife! They also listed things which could help spare you from experiencing torment in Gehanna, including tzedaka, humility, visiting the sick, teaching Torah to the son of an ignoramus, and observing the commandment to eat three meals on the Sabbath. In tractate Berakhot it says that if you say the letter of the Shema distinctly, the fires of Gehanna are cooled for you. There is also a teaching that even if you are at the gates of Gehanna, if you truly repent you can be granted Divine mercy and be exempted for the punishments of Gehanna. This world may appear unjust, with wicked prospering and righteous suffering, but all is made right in (or NOT in) Gehanna.

It is in the rabbinic period that the ideal of the punishment in Gehanna lasting 12 months first arises. While there are discussions of some categories of sinners who eternally condemned to Gehanna, this view never took hold as strongly as the 12 month view. In Judaism, Gehanna is a temporary place for purification of one’s sins, not a place of “eternal damnation” as it is for the Christians.

There are a variety of discussions on the size of Gehanna, the entrances, features, etc., none of which ever developed into a single consistent view.

The rabbinic literature discusses two versions of Gan Eden, a terrestrial and a celestial. As Gehanna is a warning to the righteous not to stray, Gan Eden is an incentive to sinners to mend their ways. It is not clear whether the rabbis thought of Gan Eden as postmortem or posthistorical, as an afterlife, or a utopian paradise. In several sources it says that the righteous enter Gan Eden at the time of Olam Ha-Ba, at the end of days, not right after death. The biblically based notion that the soul and body are united in the grave until the resurrection held sway for several centuries.

Additionally, in a number of places the rabbis speak of “Otzar” or the divine storehouse of souls, seemingly either in the highest realms of Gan Eden, or beyond Gan Eden. The Greek idea of preexisting souls is demonstrated here, with Otzar as a sort of divine holding tank. Parallel to Otzar is a shorehouse called “Guf” (body) where souls abide prior to physical embodiment. So the belief was preexistent souls descended into this incarnation from the Guf, and after death the righteous were returned to the Otzar, while others were in other realms.

Since the doctrine of resurrection was central to the rabbis, they worked hard to find scriptural basis for it. The references from Deuteronomy (31:16) and Exodus (15:1) that they use have to be severely taken out of context for them to be credible. I suppose taking things out of context is an honorable midrashic technique...

Some rabbis believed everyone gets resurrected; others said only the righteous, or those who know Torah. There was also a belief that only those buried in Israel would be resurrected. This led to many sages having their bones reinterred in Eretz Yisrael after their flesh had disintegrated in a temporary grave in Babylonia. Another solution to this problem one midrash came up with was to say that at the time of the Resurrection God will make underground passages for the righteous. There is a custom in the Diaspora to bury Jews with a small stick or dowel. This is so they can more easily burrow their way back to the Holy Land at the time of the Resurrection.

Medieval Midrash

During the 10th to 14th centuries, an elaborate form of visionary midrash flourished. “As it turns out, medieval visionary Midrash is a great source for Jewish teachings on the afterlife. With depictions of the postmortem worlds that range from the macabre to the sublime, these texts are full of graphic details of life after death, no less fantastic than Dante’s Divine Comedy. There is talk of the body being beaten with chains at death; 7 compartments of Gehanna; five different kinds of fire; coals as big as mountains; men

hanging by their hair, eyes, noses; men thrown from fire to snow, men hung by their organs for neglecting their wives and committing adultery. 7000 holes, each with 7000 scorpions, each with 300 slits, each with 7000 pouches of venom, from each of which flows six rivers of deadly poison. Offsetting all those lurid descriptions are descriptions of Gan Eden; 7 realms of the righteous, dwelling places for righteous women, additional heavenly palaces, ministering angels, our ancestors, rivers, canopies, wine preserved from the six days of Creation, eighty myriads of trees, walls of glass, paneling of cedar, paneling of olive wood, pillars of silver, etc., etc.

Medieval Philosophy

Contemporary with medieval midrash, medieval philosophy is totally different. They are primarily concerned with philosophical ideas about the essence and substance of the soul, not in mythic descriptions of the afterlife. Saadia Gaon said that ethical moral actions polish the soul, and wicked ones tarnish it. Gan Eden is accumulated luminosity, Gehanna accumulated tarnish. Saadia affirms resurrection, but rejects reincarnation and transmigration of souls. Maimonides sees Olam Ha-Ba as a realm that comes into play after communal resurrection. For Gersonides, immortality is the result of one's intellectual attainment while alive. Nachmanides, influenced by Kabbalah, comes up with a new term, Olam Ha-Neshamot, World of the Souls, completely different than Olam Ha-Ba at the end of days.

Kabbalah

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

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

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

There is no monolithic view on the type of reward and punishment, but the unchanging criteria for judgement is the extent that the individual has followed Torah. The message is identical to the one from rabbinic Judaism: good deeds and a life of Torah lead to reward in the afterlife, wickedness results in punishment. Seven occasions for divine judgment were described.

The kabbalistic attitude toward dying is that it is but a continuation of a process of drawing closer to God. As such it did not evoke great concern and consternation. The Zohar describes visions of the deathbed, including angelic beings, visionary guides, deceased relatives, even some demonic characters. It also describes visions of Adam, Shkhinah, and the Angel of Death.

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

Once the separation of body and soul is finished, the individual consciousness continues to exist as a transparent body, the “guf ha-dak,” which is spoken of as a celestial garment.

The Zohar maintains the traditional seven tiered scheme for Gehanna. In one place it teaches that the seven realms correspond directly with the seven names for the yetzer hara (evil inclination). Elsewhere it describes the seven regions of Gehanna as designated for particular categories of sinners.

Where the medieval midrash focused on fanciful descriptions of Gehanna, kabbalah focuses on the nature of the soul’s purification.

The Zohar teaches that Shabbat extends even to Gehanna, and the wicked are given a rest; “But the fires of Gehanna never ceases to burn those souls who have never kept the Sabbath.” When finished in Gehanna, the soul moves on the lower Gan Eden, and then goes through various realms in Gan Eden. As the soul moves up into upper Gan Eden, it is bathed in the celestial River of Light, nehar dinur, which heals the soul and purges it of any remaining defilements. One image used to describe upper Gan Eden is the Celestial Academy, where the divine mind of the immortal soul can attain a blissful understanding of God. The soul does not stay in Gan Eden forever; the final stop is tzror ha-hayim, the storehouse of the souls.

Kabbalah posits a belief in reincarnation, called gilgul or “wheel.” Reincarnation is seen as an act of divine mercy, where the evil doers are afforded a chance to go back and do a better job, thereby sparing themselves from the pain of purification in Gehanna. These concepts got wrapped up with the folk superstitions of Eastern Europe where for centuries the Jewish masses had believed there were spirits wandering around. In addition to full reincarnation, two versions of “possession” developed, ibbur (impregnation) which is a benign possession, and dybbuk (cleaving) which is a malignant possession. A righteous soul who needed to come back to perform some specific mitzvah could come back in an ibbur with someone, which would often be a symbiotic relationship: the exalted soul of the departed righteous person would elevate the spirit of the person possessed, who in turn would perform whatever it was that the ibbur needed doing. According to Gershom Scholem, dybukim were generally considered to be souls, which on account of the enormity of their sins, were not even allowed to transmigrate and as “denuded spirits” they sought refuge in the bodies of living persons. The entry of a dybbuk into a person was a sign of his having committed a secret sin which opened a door for the dybbuk. The term dybbuk is not in the Zohar, but appears in 1602 in Germany in the Maaseh Book. There are many stories in both Lurianic kabbalah and hasidism about exorcism of dybukim.

Of course, the notion of reincarnation creates problems with the idea of the resurrection. Who gets resurrected? Their answer was the last body that the soul had been firmly planed in. The kabbalistic community of Safed, and the early hasidim deemphasized the doctrine of bodily resurrection as a result of these difficulties.

The ultimate attainment in kabbalah is when the soul merges with the source of the divine being, as the Zohar puts it becomes “absorbed in the very body of the King.”

Hasidism

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

Hasidic tales, the short stories of mostly about tzaddikim are a rich source of insight into views of the afterlife (we’ve got Buber’s collection which has lots of great stories). Acceptance of death was very

common among the rebbes. Reb Elimelekh of Lyszchensk was extraordinarily cheerful as his death was approaching. When asked by a disciple for an explanation, he said “Why should I not rejoice, seeing that I am about to leave this world below, and enter into the higher worlds of eternity? Do you not recall the words of the Psalmist: ‘Yea, though I walk the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.’ Thus does the grace of God display itself.” Even in the midst of the horror of the holocaust, many hasidic rebbes accepted their death and affirmed their faith in God. Some examples: “The Dombrover Rebbe, Rabbi Hayyim Yehiel Rubin, prayed the Sabbath meal service, his last, with great fervor, sang the Sabbath meal song, and led twenty Jews in a hasidic dance prior to death in graves dug by themselves.” “The Grodzisker Rebbe, Rabbi Yisrael Shapira, in an inspiring message before entering the gas chambers of Treblinka, urged Jews to accept Kiddush Ha-Shem with joy. He led in the singing of Ani Maamim.”

There are also many stories of rebbes being aware of the death of rebbes far away, and of predicting very accurately in advance when they would die.

I like a point the author makes, that the hasidim have much to teach contemporary society about life, the afterlife, and how to die. The stories demonstrate that it is possible to die, as Reb Nahman “bright and clear... without any confusion whatsoever, without a single untoward gesture, in a state of awesome calmness.” I contrast this with the recent experience of Elizabeth Kubler Ross, who more or less fell apart as she was dying and basically denounced most of her life’s work. There is definitely something to be said for faith.

There are stories of the rebbes continuing their work after they’re gone, redeeming other souls in Gehanna, being told to leave Gehanna, but refusing to go until the others are allowed to leave too.

All hasidic tales on Gan Eden say that what will happen to you in the postmortem realms is a direct reflection of what you did in this life. The Maggid of Mezhrich said: “A man’s kind deeds are utilized by the Lord as seed for the planting of trees in Gan Eden; thus each man creates his own Paradise. The reverse is true when he commits transgressions.” Another teaching of the Maggid I like is “After my death I anticipate being in Gan Eden. For even if admittance should be denied me, I shall loudly begin to recite and discuss new Torah, and all the tzaddikim in Gan Eden will assemble to hear me. The place where I will stand will become Gan Eden. Reb Yakov Yosef of Polnoy said that no Gehanna could be worse for the wicked than Gan Eden. After all, in Gan Eden, there will be no physical pleasures, just tzaddikim deriving joy from the presence of the Lord. Since they didn’t train themselves for it in this world, they can never appreciate it in the next world. There’s also a story that for the uneducated but pious they will be granted an imaginary physical universe which they could enjoy.

There are stories that indicate personal relationships continue after death. There are also tales of souls who are aware of their own process of reincarnation. The Besht claimed to be a reincarnation of Rabbi Saadia Gaon, the medieval philosopher; Dov Baer was said to be a reincarnation of Rabbi Akiba. There is a legend that says when Reb Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt read the Avodah service on Yom Kippur about the Temple service, he would say “Thus did I say,” not “Thus did he say.”

Conclusion

That’s more or less where things end. The 20th century hasn’t had much to add to the literature on the Jewish afterlife, given our rationalistic focus. The author has a concluding chapter where he tries to meld psychological and kabbalistic stuff, talking about the literature of near death experiences, as well as some discussion of the bardo teaching from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. His attempt at melding the popular ideas of the day with Jewish tradition didn’t really do much for me.