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הרב אליעזר בן משה יוסף ושרה שפיץ

### **Survival of the Soul: Jewish Texts and Interpretations**

Most of us would like to see our loved ones in an afterlife. In Judaism and the other major religions, the afterlife is a given. And yet, many Jews are unaware that Judaism traditionally espouses survival of the soul. Even more remarkably, the Bible says very little about what happens after death and the rabbis lack a consensus as to the details of the other side. The goal of this course is to share an array of Jewish texts that elucidate Jewish perspectives on what occurs after the final breath. And to aid you in coming to your own conclusions, using the wisdom of those before us as fellow jurors. In examining the evidence for survival of the soul, know that because you want something to be true does not mean that it is false. For instance, just because you want to feel loved, does not mean that you are not. At the same time, we must take into account our wishes when judging the nature of life experience. We as Jews possess the wisdom of those before us as a guide and a challenge, while retaining the responsibility to include modern resources as well in forming our beliefs.

#### ***Tanakh: Ambiguity concerning the Afterlife***

The Bible lacks a straightforward description of what happens after death. The term *she'ol* (שְׂאֵל) is used sixty-five times in the *Tanakh* for a destination after death, plus there are related terms as *bor*, *shakhat*, and *avedon*. For each of these words, the reader must decide if the term is used literally or metaphorically, whether referring to the grave or a place of consciousness. For instance, consider the ambiguity of the first time that *she'ol* appears (Genesis 42:38). Jacob, when initially opposing sending Benjamin to Egypt with his brothers, states, “My son must not go down with you, for his brother is dead and he alone is left. If he meets with disaster on the journey you are taking, you will send my white head down to *she'ol* in grief.”



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Sep 30, 2020

The term *she'ol* is repeatedly used in *Tanakh* in contradictory ways, as if both with a capital letter and not. Consider the following citation in which *she'ol* is just a grave, “Your magnificence has been flung down to *she'ol* underneath a bed of maggots and over you a blanket of worms” (Isaiah 14:11) and as an alternative realm, “Her house is a highway to *She'ol*, leading down to death’s inner chambers (Proverbs 7:27). Likewise, the *Tanakh* describes both a lack of consciousness after death and animation: “For soon I shall lie down in the dust. When you seek me, I shall be gone” (Job 7:21); “A dead man’s sons come to honor and he knows it not” (Job 14:21); “The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing” (Ecclesiastes 9:5); and the contrast of “The shades tremble beneath the waters and their denizens (Job 26:5); “*She'ol* was astir to greet your coming- rousing for you the shades of all earth’s leaders, raising from their thrones all the kings of the nations. All speak up and say to you, ‘So you have been stricken as we were, You have become like us” (Isaiah 14:9-10); “Thus said the Lord, ‘A cry is heard in Ramah- wailing, bitter weeping- Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted” (Jeremiah 31:15). And death is presented as a one-way path or as enabling the possibility of return: “All who go to her cannot return and find again the paths of life” (Proverbs 2:19); “They are dead, they can never live; shades, they can never rise” (Isaiah 26:14); “The dead shall not awake nor be raised out of sleep” (Job 14:12), as contrasted with “I kill and make alive” (Deuteronomy 32:39); “Take away their breath; they perish and turn again into dust; send back your breath, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth” (Psalm 104:29-30); “Many who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to eternal abhorrence” (Daniel 12:2). With each quote the reader is left to ponder if the phrase is literal or not and why are there such contradictory descriptions, even within the same book? The disparity of interpretations of *she'ol* is imbedded in the Hebrew, where depending on the vowels it can be read as *sho'al*, a hollow hand- suggestive of emptiness or *sha'al*, meaning “to ask”- implying a netherworld with conscious beings.

Responding to such a limited description of the afterlife, some scholars, such as Yehezkiel Kaufman, the influential, Israeli Bible scholar, concluded that the afterlife “plays no part in the religion of YHVH...The Biblical age had not yet succeeded in forming a conception of a judgment of the soul and its deliverance from death that would be vitiated by the images of an infernal god of the apotheosis [deification] of the dead.” [Yehezkiel Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginning to the Babylonian Exile*, translated by Moshe Greenberg (New York: Schocken, 1959, 1972), pp.311, 316]. Ephraim Urbach in his opus *The Sages*, stated, “In the Bible a monistic view prevails. Man is not composed of two elements- body and soul, or flesh and spirit.” [Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages, the Concepts and Beliefs*, vol. 1, translator Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), p.214] Likewise, Neil Gilman in *The Death of Death* posited that there was no dualism in the Bible, prompting a Biblical belief in reanimation of a united body-soul. Gillman writes, “The idea that human beings will live again after death cannot be found in Jewish writings much before the second century B.C.E. and the idea that we possess a soul which never dies is not found until roughly a century later” [Neil Gilman, *The*



*Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997), p.22].

In contrast, modern Bible scholars, such as the JPS commentators Jacob Milgrom, Jeffrey Tigay, and Nahum Sarna, all conclude that the Biblical authors believed in a soul that survives separately from a body. They point to a repeated phrase in *Tanakh*, *ve'ye'asaf el amav*, “And he was gathered to his people.” This phrase, which occurs with some verbal variation, is sandwiched between “he died” and “he was buried.” The triplet phrase occurs ten times in the Torah and is linked to six key figures- Abraham (Genesis 25:8-9), Ishmael (Genesis 25:17), Isaac (Genesis 35:29), Jacob (Genesis 49:29, 33), Aaron (Numbers 20:24; Deuteronomy 32:50) and Moses (Numbers 27:13; 31:2; Deuteronomy 32:50).

These contemporary Biblical scholars point out that in the ancient world, all of Israel's neighbors believed in survival of the soul. And the phrase “gathered to his people” is used in neighboring texts to describe the afterlife. The Torah alludes to the afterlife cryptically, because it was a given belief among the people. The Torah's focus is on the new: cultivating the Israelites' covenant with God. Like a showcase window in a department store, the Bible does not describe lifecycle rituals in detail, not because they did not exist, but precisely because they already existed as a given in people's folk lives. Jacob Milgrom explains that the Biblical phrase of punishment, “and you shall be cut off (*karet*) from your ancestors” was the flip-side of “you shall be gathered to your ancestors.” The reward of a life well lived was survival of the soul with those who went before you. See for instance the following quote by Nahum Sarna in his *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989) (p.174) to Genesis 25:7-11:

*He was gathered to his kin.* This phrase, peculiar to the Torah, is also used of Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Aaron, and Moses. An analysis of the context in which it is found reveals that it is to be distinguished from death itself because it is employed of Abraham, Aaron, and Moses, none of whom was buried with his forefathers. It is also not identical with internment in general because the report of burial follows this phrase and the difference between the two is especially blatant in the case of Jacob, who was interred quite a while after being “gathered to his kin.” It would seem therefore that the existence of this idiom, as of the corresponding figure “to lie down with one's father,” testifies to a belief that despite his morality and perishability, man possesses an immortal element that survives the loss of life. Death is looked upon as a transition to an afterlife where one is united with one's ancestors. The interpretation contradicts the widespread, but apparently erroneous views that such a notion is unknown in Israel until later times” “Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), p. 174.

### Medieval Commentators



Medieval commentators had already recognized that the phrase, *ve'nesaf el amav* referred to an afterlife, as is evident below. After all, as regards Abraham he was the founder of the people. Hence, gathered to “his people” is seen as the righteous, another indication that in the rabbinic tradition a person did not need to be Jewish to attain the afterlife.



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Sep 30, 2020

## Abraham ibn Ezra (Spain, 1089-1164/7)

There are those who say that it is speaking of the “glory of the soul.” Because its existence is dealt with as a separate entity than the body. And in its separation from the body, the “glory” is gathered to his people. And there are those who say that it is a colloquialism [of being gathered to one’s family]. And the implication is of his going the way of his ancestors, as if he will connect to them, and so, “and you will come to your ancestors in peace” (Genesis 15:15).

David Kimichi (Spain, 1160-1235)

“And he was gathered to his people” – to the members of his family that had died and was gathered to them. And this is the standard language of Scripture, whether the ancestors were righteous or wicked

Obadiah Sforno (Italy, 1475-1550)

“And he gathered to his people” – was gathered to the “bundle of life” to life eternal with the righteous of the generations, for they are “his people” and similar to him. And it is said “his people” in the plural, because although there is a great difference between the righteous in their attributes, nonetheless all are worthy for life eternal, as it is said by those remembered for a blessing- “each of them is banished from his neighbor’s canopy.”

(ח) מלת ויגוע. צאת הרוח מהגוף רגע אחד בלי עינוי ועיכוב. ראב"ע הלא תראה ויאסף רגליו אל המטה (מט ג). ומיד גוע. והנה כל גויעה מיתה, ואין כל מיתה גויעה. על כן כתוב במבול ויגוע (ז כא). ופי' וימת אברהם. שמת בשיבה טובה<sup>71</sup>. ויאסף אל עמיו. י"א כי על כבוד הנפש אמר, כי בהיותו מתעסקים עם הגוף הוא כחלק נפרד. ובהפרד מהגוף יאסף הכבוד אל עמיו. וי"א כי זה משפט הלשון<sup>72</sup>. והטעם על לכתו בדרך אבותיו כאילו יתחבר אליהם, וכן ואתה תבוא אל אבותיך בשלום (טו טו).

(ח) ויגוע וימת, גויעה מיתה קלה שאינה באריכות חולי<sup>5</sup>. בשיבה רדי"ק טובה, שראה לו בנים ובני בנים והיה בטובה ובכבוד כל ימיו. ובדרש<sup>6</sup> שעשה ישמעאל תשובה בימיו. זקן ושבע, שבע ימים. ויאסף אל עמיו, אל בני משפחתו שמתו ונאסף אליהם, וזה הלשון נהוג במקרא יהיו האבות צדיקים או רשעים.

(ח) ושבע. מכל מה שהתאווה לראות ולעשות בימיו<sup>54</sup>. ויאסף אל ספורנו עמיו. נאסף אל צרור החיים לחיי העולם עם צדיקי הדורות שהם עמיו ודומים אליו, ואמרו “עמיו” בלשון רבים, כי אמנם רב ההבדל בין הצדיקים כמעלה עם היוחסם כלם זוכים לחיי עולם, כאמרם ז"ל<sup>55</sup> “שכל אחד ואחד נכוה מחופתו<sup>56</sup> של חבירו”.



## Mediums: From the apparently forbidden to acceptance

The possibility of survival of disembodied consciousness raised the possibility of communication with the other side. Doing so was not only forbidden in the Torah, but the penalty for a medium was death. This Biblical mandate would later become the foundation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Salem, Massachusetts's witch trials and burnings.

### Relevant Biblical texts:

Do not turn to ghosts and do not inquire of familiar spirits, to be defiled by them: I the LORD am your God.

אל-תפנו אל-האבת ואל-הידענים אל-תבקשו לטמאה בהם אני ה' אלקיכם:  
Leviticus 19:31

And if any person turns to ghosts and familiar spirits and goes astray after them, I will set My face against that person and cut him off from among his people.

והנפש אשר תפנה אל-האבת ואל-הידענים לזנות אחריהם ונתתי את-פני בנפש ההוא והכרתי אתו מקרב עמו:  
Leviticus 20:6

A man or a woman who has a ghost or a familiar spirit shall be put to death; they shall be pelted with stones- their bloodguilt shall be upon them.

ואיש או-אשה כי-יהיה בהם אוב או ידעני מות יומתו באבן ירגמו אתם דמיהם בם:  
Leviticus 20:27

When you enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to the LORD, and it is because of these abhorrent things that the LORD your God is dispossessing them before you.

כי אתה בא אל-הארץ אשר-יהוה אלהיך נתן לך לא-תלמד לעשות כתועבת הגוים ההם: <sup>10</sup>לא-ימצא בך מעביר בנו-ובתו באש קסם קסמים מעונן ומנחש ומכשף: <sup>11</sup>וחבר חבר ושאל אוב וידעני ודרש אל-המתים: <sup>12</sup>כי-תועבת ה' כל-עשה אלה ובגלל התועבת האלה ה' אלקיך מוריש אותם מפניך:  
Deuteronomy 18:9-12

ויחיהו ||| ||| חסידים

If people say to you, “Enquire of the necromancers and the diviners who chirp and snort.” [respond:] ”Should not a people inquire of their own God? [Should we inquire] of the dead for the living?!”

וכי-יאמרו אליכם דרשו אל-האבות ואל-הידענים המצפצפים והמהגים הלוא-עם אל-אלקיו ידרש בעד החיים אל-המתים:  
Isaiah 8:19

## King Saul and the Witch of Endor: 1 Samuel 28

The nature of language and law is ambiguity. Context is always necessary to determine what the words mean. Consider the clarity of the Biblical words, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21:24). On the surface, the words suggest direct retribution, called talion. If a person knocks out an eye, the punishment is mutilation of an eye. But, the rabbis chose not to interpret the words literally and instead with a variety of Biblical texts as evidence stated that the verse meant just monetary compensation (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 83b-84a). In determining the meaning of the Biblical quotes regarding mediums, context was needed, too. As we will see the Rabbis will limit the prohibition to activity only in the context of idolatry. The following story from the Book of Samuel taking place in the 11<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., indicates the possibility of speaking with a person who has died with the aid of a medium.



א ויהי בימים ההם, ויקבצו פְּלִשְׁתִּים אֶת-מַחְנֵיהֶם לְצָבָא, לְהִלָּחֵם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל; וַיֹּאמֶר אַכִּישׁ, אֶל-דָּוִד, יָדַע תָּדַע כִּי אֶתִי תֵצֵא בַמַּחֲנֶה, אִתְּךָ וְאֶנְשֵׁיךָ.

1 And it came to pass in those days, that the Philistines gathered their hosts together for warfare, to fight with Israel. And Achish said unto David: 'Know thou assuredly, that thou shalt go out with me in the host, thou and thy men.'

ב וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד, אֶל-אַכִּישׁ, לָכֵן אֶתְּךָ תָּדַע, אֶת אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲשֶׂה עִבְדְּךָ; וַיֹּאמֶר אַכִּישׁ, אֶל-דָּוִד, לָכֵן שָׁמַר לְרֹאשִׁי אֲשִׁימָךְ, כָּל-הַיָּמִים. {פ}

2 And David said to Achish: 'Therefore thou shalt know what thy servant will do.' And Achish said to David: 'Therefore will I make thee keeper of my head for ever.' {P}

ג וַשָּׂמוּאֵל מָת--וַיִּסְפְּדוּ-לוֹ כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיִּקְבְּרוּהוּ בְרָמָה וּבְעִירוֹ; וְשָׂאוּל, הִסִּיר הָאֲבוֹת וְאֶת-הַיְדֻעָנִים--מִהָאָרֶץ.

3 Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had lamented him, and buried him in Ramah, even in his own city. And Saul had put away those that divined by a ghost or a familiar spirit out of the land.

ד וַיִּקְבְּצוּ פְּלִשְׁתִּים, וַיָּבֹאוּ וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּשֻׁנֵם; וַיִּקְבֹּץ שָׂאוּל אֶת-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּגִלְבֹּעַ.

4 And the Philistines gathered themselves together, and came and pitched in Shunem; and Saul gathered all Israel together, and they pitched in Gilboa.

ה וַיֵּרָא שָׂאוּל, אֶת-מַחֲנֵה פְּלִשְׁתִּים; וַיִּרָא, וַיִּחְרַד לְבֹו מְאֹד.

5 And when Saul saw the host of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly.

ו וַיִּשְׁאַל שָׂאוּל בַּיהוָה, וְלֹא עָנָהוּ יְהוָה--גַּם בְּחִלְמוֹת גַּם בְּאוּרִים, גַּם בְּנְבִיאִים.

6 And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets.

ז וַיֹּאמֶר שָׂאוּל לְעִבְדָיו, בְּקִשׁוּ-לִי אִשָּׁת בְּעַלְת-אוֹב, וְאִלְכָה אֵלֶיהָ, וְאִדְרָשָׁה-בָּהּ; וַיֹּאמְרוּ עִבְדָיו אֵלָיו, הִנֵּה אִשָּׁת בְּעַלְת-אוֹב בְּעֵין דּוֹר.

7 Then said Saul unto his servants: 'Seek me a woman that divineth by a ghost, that I may go to her, and inquire of her.' And his servants said to him: 'Behold, there is a woman that divineth by a ghost at En-dor.'

ח וַיִּתְחַפֵּשׂ שָׂאוּל, וַיִּלְבַּשׂ בְּגָדִים אֲחֵרִים, וַיֵּלֶךְ הוּא וּשְׁנֵי אַנְשָׁים עִמּוֹ, וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-הָאִשָּׁה לַיְלָה; וַיֹּאמֶר, קְסוּמִי- (קֶסְמִי-) נָא לִי בְּאוֹב, וְהֶעֱלֵי לִי, אֶת אֲשֶׁר-אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ.

8 And Saul disguised himself, and put on other raiment, and went, he and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night; and he said: 'Divine unto me, I pray thee, by a ghost, and bring me up whomsoever I shall name unto thee.'

ט וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה אֵלָיו, הִנֵּה אֶתְּךָ יָדַעְתָּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה שָׂאוּל, אֲשֶׁר הִכְרִית אֶת-הָאֲבוֹת וְאֶת-הַיְדֻעָנִי,

9 And the woman said unto him: 'Behold, thou knowest what Saul hath done, how he hath cut off those that divine by a ghost or a familiar spirit out of the land; wherefore then

מִן-הָאָרֶץ; וְלָמָּה אֶתְּךָ מִתְנַקֵּשׁ בְּנַפְשִׁי, לְהַמִּיתֵנִי.

layest thou a snare for my life, to cause me to die?'

י וַיִּשָּׁבַע לָהּ שָׂאוּל, בַּיהוָה לֵאמֹר: מִי-יְהוָה, אִם-יִקְרָךְ עוֹן בְּדַבַּר הַזֶּה.

10 And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying: 'As the LORD liveth, there shall no punishment happen to thee for this thing.'



יז וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה לּוֹ, כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר בְּיָדִי; וַיִּקְרַע יְהוָה אֶת-הַמְּמַלְכָה מִיָּדִי, וַיִּתְּנָהּ לְרֵעֵךְ לְדָוִד.

17 And the LORD hath wrought for Himself; as He spoke by me; and the LORD hath rent the kingdom out of thy hand, and given it to thy neighbour, even to David.

יח כַּאֲשֶׁר לֹא-שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹל יְהוָה, וְלֹא-עָשִׂיתָ חֲרוֹן-אָפוֹ בְּעַמְלֶק; עַל-כֵּן הִדְבַּר הַזֶּה, עָשָׂה-לְךָ יְהוָה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.

18 Because thou didst not hearken to the voice of the LORD, and didst not execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore hath the LORD done this thing unto thee this day.

יט וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה גַּם אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל עִמָּךְ, בְּיַד-פְּלִשְׁתִּים, וּמָחָר, אַתָּה וּבָנֶיךָ עִמִּי; גַּם אֶת-מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל, יִתֵּן יְהוָה בְּיַד-פְּלִשְׁתִּים.

19 Moreover the LORD will deliver Israel also with thee into the hand of the Philistines; and to-morrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me; the LORD will deliver the host of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines.'

כ וַיִּמְהַר שָׂאוּל, וַיִּפֹּל מִלֵּא-קוֹמָתוֹ אַרְצָה, וַיִּרָא מָאֵד, מִדְּבַרֵי שָׂמוּאֵל; גַּם-כֹּחַ, לֹא-הָיָה בּוֹ--כִּי לֹא אָכַל לֶחֶם, כָּל-הַיּוֹם וְכָל-הַלַּיְלָה.

20 Then Saul fell straightway his full length upon the earth, and was sore afraid, because of the words of Samuel; and there was no strength in him; for he had eaten no bread all the day, nor all the night.

כא וַתָּבוֹא הָאִשָּׁה אֶל-שָׂאוּל, וַתִּרְאֵהוּ כִּי-נִבְהַל מָאֵד; וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, הֲנִיָּה שָׁמְעָה שְׁפָחָתְךָ בְּקוֹלְךָ, וְאִשִּׁים נִפְשֵׁי בְּכַפִּי, וְאִשְׁמַע אֶת-דְּבַרְיֶךָ אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ אֵלַי.

21 And the woman came unto Saul, and saw that he was sore affrighted, and said unto him: 'Behold, thy handmaid hath hearkened unto thy voice, and I have put my life in my hand, and have hearkened unto thy words which thou spakest unto me.'

כב וְעַתָּה, שְׁמַע-נָא גַם-אַתָּה בְּקוֹל שְׁפָחָתְךָ, וְאִשְׁמָה לְפָנֶיךָ פַת-לֶחֶם, וְאִכֹּל; וַיְהִי בָּךְ כֹּחַ, כִּי תֵלֵךְ בְּדַרְךָ.

22 Now therefore, I pray thee, hearken thou also unto the voice of thy handmaid, and let me set a morsel of bread before thee; and eat, that thou mayest have strength, when thou goest on thy way.'

כג וַיִּמְאֵן, וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲכַל, וַיִּפְרְצוּ-בּוֹ עֲבָדָיו וְגַם-הָאִשָּׁה, וַיִּשְׁמַע לְקוֹלָם; וַיִּקָּם, מִהָאָרֶץ, וַיִּשָּׁב, אֶל-הַמִּטָּה.

23 But he refused, and said: 'I will not eat.' But his servants, together with the woman, urged him; and he hearkened unto their voice. So he arose from the earth, and sat upon the bed.

כד וְלֵאשָׁה עֵגֶל-מְרֻבָּק בַּבַּיִת, וַתִּמְהַר וַתִּזְבַּחַהּ; וַתִּקַּח-קֶמַח וַתִּלְשׁ, וַתַּפְּהוּ מִצּוֹת.

24 And the woman had a fattened calf in the house; and she made haste, and killed it; and she took flour, and kneaded it, and did bake unleavened bread thereof;

כה וַתִּגֵּשׁ לְפָנֵי-שָׂאוּל וּלְפָנֵי עֲבָדָיו, וַיֹּאכְלוּ; וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ, בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא. {פ}

25 and she brought it before Saul, and before his servants; and they did eat. Then they rose up, and went away that night. {P}

## More about Mediums

“Or that consults with the dead” means one who starves himself and spends the night in a cemetery, so that an “unclean spirit” may rest upon him.

And when Rabbi Akiva reached this verse, he wept: “If one who starves himself that an unclean spirit [The divine presence] may rest upon him – how much more should his desire be fulfilled.” (*Sanhedrin 65b*)

The Talmud’s discussion of the biblical prohibition of calling on the dead assumes that such communication is possible, which is reinforced by the following story about two of the leading rabbis of the fourth-century Babylonia:

Raba, seated before Rav Nahman, saw him sinking into slumber [death]. Said [Rav Nahman] to Raba: “Tell him [the angel of death], master, not to make it painful for me.”

He [Raba] replied: “Master, are you not an important man?”

Said [Rav Nahman] to him: “Who is important, well-regarded, or distinguished [before the Angel of Death]?”

Said [Raba] to him: “Show yourself to me [after your death], Master.”

He [Rav Nahman] replied: “No more than removing a hair from milk. But if the Holy One, blessed be He, were to say to me, ‘Go back to the world as you were,’ I would decline, for the dread [of death] is anguishing.”

(*BT Moed Katan 28a*)

Shulchan Arukh – *Yoreh Deah* 179, “Laws of Inquiry & Mediums” – 814 Karo: To cause an ill person to swear that he will return to him after death to give a response to what is asked is permitted. *Remah*: *And there are those who even permit after his death to cause him to swear as long as it is not the body of the dead but his spirit.*



Resurrection: Daniel Chapter 12



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- א** וּבַעַת הַהִיא יַעֲמֵד מִיכָאֵל הַשָּׁר הַגָּדוֹל, הַעֹמֵד עַל-בְּנֵי עַמּוֹד, וְהִיְתָה עֵת צָרָה, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-נִהְיְתָה מִהֵימֹת גּוֹי עַד הַעַת הַהִיא; וּבַעַת הַהִיא יִמְלֹט עַמּוֹד, כָּל-הַנִּמְצָא כְּתוּב בַּסֵּפֶר.
- ב** וְרַבִּים, מִיִּשְׁנֵי אַדְמַת-עֶפֶר יִקְיָצוּ; אֵלֶּה לְחַיֵּי עוֹלָם, וְאֵלֶּה לְחַרְפוֹת לְדָרְאוֹן עוֹלָם. {ס}
- ג** וְהַמְּשֻׁכְּלִים--יִזְהָרוּ, כְּזֹהַר הַרְקִיעַ; וּמִצְדִּיקֵי, הַרְבִּים, כְּכּוֹכְבִים, לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד. {פ}
- ד** וְאַתָּה דָּנִיֵּאל, סַתֵּם הַדְּבָרִים וְחַתֵּם הַסֵּפֶר--עַד-עֵת קֶץ; יִשְׁטָטוּ רַבִּים, וְתִרְבֶּה הַדְּעִת.
- ה** וְרָאִיתִי אֲנִי דָּנִיֵּאל, וְהִנֵּה שְׁנַיִם אַחֲרָיִם עֹמְדִים: אֶחָד הִנֵּה לְשֵׁפֶת הַיָּאֵר, וְאֶחָד הִנֵּה לְשֵׁפֶת הַיָּאֵר.
- ו** וַיֹּאמֶר, לְאִישׁ לְבוּשׁ הַבְּדִים, אֲשֶׁר מִמַּעַל, לְמִימֵי הַיָּאֵר: עַד-מָתַי, קֶץ הַפְּלָאוֹת.
- ז** וְאִשְׁמַע אֶת-הָאִישׁ לְבוּשׁ הַבְּדִים, אֲשֶׁר מִמַּעַל לְמִימֵי הַיָּאֵר, וַיָּרֶם יְמִינוֹ וַיִּשְׁמְאֵלוּ אֶל-הַשָּׁמַיִם, וַיִּשְׁבַּע בְּחַי הָעוֹלָם: כִּי לְמוֹעֵד מוֹעֲדִים וְחֻצֵי, וַיִּכְבְּלוּת נִפְץ יָד-עַם-קֹדֶשׁ--תִּתְּקַלְּנָה כָּל-אֵלֶּה.
- ח** וְאֲנִי שָׁמַעְתִּי, וְלֹא אָבִין; וְאָמַרְה--אֲדַנִּי, מָה אַחֲרֵית אֵלֶּה. {פ}
- ט** וַיֹּאמֶר, לְךָ דָּנִיֵּאל: כִּי-סַתַּמְתִּים וְחַתַּמְתִּים הַדְּבָרִים, עַד-עֵת קֶץ.
- י** יִתְבָּרְרוּ וַיִּתְּלַבְּנוּ וַיִּצְרְפוּ, רַבִּים, וְהַרְשִׁיעוּ רָשָׁעִים, וְלֹא יִבְיִנוּ
- 1** And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince who standeth for the children of thy people; and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time; and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book.
- 2** And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to reproaches and everlasting abhorrence. {S}
- 3** And they that are wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn the many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever. {P}
- 4** But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased.'
- 5** Then I Daniel looked, and, behold, there stood other two, the one on the bank of the river on this side, and the other on the bank of the river on that side.
- 6** And one said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river: 'How long shall it be to the end of the wonders?'
- 7** And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, when he lifted up his right hand and his left hand unto heaven, and swore by Him that liveth for ever that it shall be for a time, times, and a half; and when they have made an end of breaking in pieces the power of the holy people, all these things shall be finished.
- 8** And I heard, but I understood not; then said I: 'O my lord, what shall be the latter end of these things?' {P}
- 9** And he said: 'Go thy way, Daniel; for the words are shut up and sealed till the time of the end.
- 10** Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the



- כָּל-רָשָׁעִים ; וְהַמְשַׁכְּלִים , זְבִינוּ. wicked shall understand; but they that are wise shall understand.
- יא** וּמֵעַתָּה הוֹסֵר הַתְּמִיד , וְלִתְּת שְׁקוּץ שִׁמְם--יָמִים , אֶלֶף מָאתַיִם וְתִשְׁעִים. **11** And from the time that the continual burnt-offering shall be taken away, and the detestable thing that causes appalment set up, there shall be a thousand two hundred and ninety days.
- יב** אֲשֶׁרִי הַמְּחַכָּה , וְנִגִיעַ : לְיָמִים-- אֶלֶף , שְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת שְׁלֹשִׁים וְחֲמִשָּׁה. **12** Happy is he that waiteth, and cometh to the thousand three hundred and five and thirty days.
- יג** וְאַתָּה , לֵךְ לְקוֹץ ; וְתַנּוּחַ וְתַעֲמֹד לְגִרְלָהּ , לְקוֹץ הַיָּמִין . { ש } **13** But go thou thy way till the end be; and thou shalt rest, and shalt stand up to thy lot, at the end of the days.' {P}

BT Berachot 17a – (Artscroll’s *The Shottenstein Edition*)

Another recurrent teaching:

**מִרְגְּלָא בְּפִוּמֵיהּ דְּרַב – The following was a familiar [lesson] in the mouth of Rav:** **לֹא בְּעוֹלָם הַיְהוּדָה הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא – The World to Come is not like this world.** **– הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא אֵין בּוֹ לֹא אֲכִילָה וְלֹא שְׁתִּיָּה – In the World to Come<sup>[50]</sup> there is no eating, no drinking, וְלֹא וְלֹא – no propagation, no business, וְלֹא וְלֹא – no jealousy, no hatred and no rivalry. – אֶלָּא צְדִיקִים יוֹשְׁבִין וְעֵטְרוֹתֵיהֶם בְּרֹאשֵׁיהֶם – Rather, the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads, וְנִהְנְוִים מִזִּוּ – and delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence, וְהִשְׂכִּינָה – as it is stated: “וַיִּחְזוּ אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ” – they gazed at God, and they ate and drank.<sup>[51]</sup>**



50. Bodily life after resurrection is the subject of a dispute among Rishonim. *Ramah*, *Ramban* and many others insist that the resurrected state is eternal. Once resurrected, the righteous will live forever with body and soul united, delighting in the splendor of the Divine Presence. According to this view, Rav's dictum refers to the united state of body and soul. Nevertheless, the resurrected will not have their present physical needs or functions; rather, their bodies will be sustained

through a spiritual nourishment, just as Moses was sustained on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights without food or drink (see *Exodus* 34:28; *Deuteronomy* 9:9,18). According to the interpretation of *Ramban's* view by *Sefer HaIkkarim* (4:35), however, the resurrected will *initially* have normal physical functions, and only *after* their natural life spans will their bodies be transformed and elevated to an ethereal state, in which they will require no physical sustenance.

According to *Rambam* and those who follow his view, the eternal world is not the world of resurrection but the World of Souls, inasmuch as (in their opinion) the state of resurrection is *not* permanent. Rather, the righteous will be resurrected sometime during the lengthy era of Messianic reign. They will live unusually long, happy lives in an idyllic period that culminates life on this earth – eating, drinking and procreating just like the people born initially in that epoch. Eventually, however, all earthly and bodily life will end, with the souls of the deserving returning to the World of Souls to delight in the Divine Presence forever. According to this view, Rav speaks here of the World of Souls, not the world of resurrection. See *Megadim Chadashim* here on this topic.

51. *Exodus* 24:11. At the Revelation at Mt. Sinai the Jews were in a state similar to that of the World to Come. They wore “crowns” on their heads (see *Shabbos* 88a) and were removed from worldly pleasures (*Maharsha*). The verse means that they were sated from the radiance of the Divine Presence as if they had partaken of food and drink (*Rashi*). See also *Onkelos* to the verse.



## **Reincarnation** (*Gilgul* or Transmigration of Souls)

Reincarnation entered into mainstream Jewish belief in significant part due to the widespread acceptance of the Zohar as a sacred text. There is no direct reference to reincarnation in the Torah or the Talmud. Some of the prominent rabbis prior to the Zohar (13th century, Spain) rejected the notion of reincarnation. Saadiah Gaon in the 10th century referred to such a belief as "madness and confusion" (*The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 6:7). Maimonides (11th century, Spain) makes no mention of it in his extensive writings. Yet, *Sefer HaBahir* (anonymous, late 12th century) presents reincarnation in several places as an explanation of why children are born with physical deficits and as a Biblical proof-text cites Ecclesiastes (1:4), "One generation passes away and another comes."

An example from *Sefer HaBahir*:

Why is there a righteous person who has good and another righteous person who has evil?

This is because the [second] righteous person was wicked previously and is now being punished.

Is one then punished for his childhood deeds? Did not the Rabbi Simon say that in the Tribunal on high no punishment is meted out until one is twenty year or older?

He said, I am not speaking of his present lifetime. I am speaking about what he has already been previously. [Translation of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *The Bahir*, (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1979, 1990), part 1, section 195, pp. 77-78))

Nahmanides (13th century, Spain) states "one of the great secrets of the Torah" is the explanation of *yibum*- the Biblical mandate of the next of kin of a childless, deceased husband to procreate with the widow. Nahmanides suggests that *yibum* enables the soul of



the deceased to reincarnate into the newborn (Genesis 38:8). Nahrnanides is more explicit in his commentary to the book of Job's Elihu that suffering in this life is due to wrongs in a past life (Job 33:30). As noted above, in the Zohar *gilgul* is presented as the nature of the afterlife and would become more developed in the teaching of Isaac Luria of 15th century, Safed. Among Hasidim, a folk-psychological expansion of Jewish mysticism, there was widespread belief that Rebbes, starting with the Ba'al Shern Tov (Ukraine, 17th century) could look at a person and see their previous incarnations going all the way back to Adam.

### **Zohar 2:99b (*Sava de-Mishpatim*)**

Come and see: *If another woman he takes for him* (Exodus 21:10). How great and supernal the cycles ( *gilgulin d'matgalalan*) revolving in this verse! For all souls enter a cycle (*gilgula*), and human beings do not know the ways of the blessed Holy One: how the scales stand, how humans are judged every day at all times, and how souls stand in judgment both before they enter this world and after leaving this world.

How many revolutions, how many concealed actions does the blessed Holy One perform with souls! How many naked spirits roam that world, not entering the curtain of the King! How overturned by them is the world, overturned by countless sealed wonders! And human beings do not know of notice- and how souls whirl like a stone in a sling, as is said: *The soul of your enemies He will sling from the hollow of a sling* {I Samuel 25:29).

(Excerpt taken from Daniel Matt's *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), volume V, page 36.

Reincarnation is so mainstream a concept in Orthodoxy today that it is found in the popularly used siddur, *Artscroll.*, as part of the traditional paragraph of confessional before reciting the Shema of bedtime:

"Master of the Universe, I hereby forgive anyone who angered or antagonized me... whether in this transmigration (*gilgul*) or another transmigration."





## Reaching Your Own Conclusions

As a modern person, you are invited to reach your own conclusions of faith. The sages before us give us wisdom to consider, but you have to weigh the evidence of survival of the soul for yourself. Included is a handful of personal questions for you to consider:

1. Have you ever had encounter with mysterious events around the passing or funeral of a loved one? If so, describe the event and what meaning you draw from it.
2. Have you or someone you know ever had a near-death-experience. If so, describe. What do you make as to the nature and lessons of the experience?
3. Have you or someone you know ever had an experience with an etheric figure or a conversation with the deceased, whether in a wakeful state or in a dream? Describe. What is the significance?
4. Do you have any such experiences with a medium? Describe. What do you make of the significance of the experience.
5. Do you know anyone with a past life memory? Do you? Have you ever witnessed a past-life hypnotic regression? If so, describe.
6. Last, your verdict: Do you believe in survival of the soul? If not, why not? If yes, what persuades you?

## Impact of Belief in Survival of the Soul

A belief in survival of the soul offers comfort both to the dying and their family. In spending time with a person who is dying, I will speak about Jewish views of the afterlife. I ask about their beliefs and whether the patient has had any visitations from the "other side," whether wakeful or in dreams. Such encounters are more common than I knew before



asking. Death is much like sleep, a letting go of consciousness. Like sleep, there is the ability to resist for quite a while and the blessing of letting go when one is ready.

Helping people harvest their life and repair broken relationships aids closure. I guide family with five statements to share with a loved one who is dying: Thank you; Forgive me; I forgive you; I love you; You can go (when you are ready). The more specific and personal the statements (more like paragraphs), the better: enabling an openness of relationship, an untying of knots, and enhanced ease in the last phase of life. We are wise not to assume that the person dying knows what is in our hearts and minds. It is good to state our feelings explicitly. Some avoid the "forgive" part as if protecting the loved one. It is wise to compassionately express these unresolved issues so as to forgive, be forgiven, enabling wholeness on both sides.

And yet, with death there is loss: the inability to embrace; to converse; to share precious moments. As a grief counselor, I begin with honoring the emotions of mourning. Each person has a unique relationship with the deceased and his or her own stories. I try and elicit those stories both to aid the healing process and to honor the memory of the deceased.



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Rabbi Elie Spitz is a caring mentor to his congregants and a scholar. He served as a member of the Rabbinical Assembly Committee of Law and Standards (1994-2004; 2008-2016) and as a Global Justice Fellow for the American Jewish World Service (2016-2017). A graduate of The Jewish Theological Seminary and Boston University School of Law, Rabbi Spitz is the author of three books and many articles dealing with spirituality and Jewish law. He has taught the philosophy of Jewish law at the American Jewish University and taught at the Wilkinson College, Religious Studies Department at Chapman University. He lives in Tustin, California with his wife, Linda; they are the parents of Joseph, Jonathan and Anna Rose.



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