What Comes Next?: Judaism and Life After Death

I want to begin with a parable:

Imagine twins growing peacefully in the warmth of the womb. Their mouths are closed, and they are being fed via the navel. Their lives are serene. The whole world, to these brothers, is the interior of the womb. Who could conceive anything larger, better, more comfortable? They begin to wonder: "We are getting lower and lower. Surely if is continues, we will exit one day. What will happen after we exit?"

Now the first infant is a believer. He is heir to a religious tradition which tells him that there will be a "new life" after this wet and warm existence of the womb. A strange belief, seemingly without foundation, but one to which he holds fast. The second infant is a thorough-going skeptic. Mere stories do not deceive him. He believes only in that which can be demonstrated. He is enlightened, and tolerates no idle conjecture. What is not within one's experience can have no basis in one's imagination.

Says the faithful brother: "After our 'death' here, there will be a new great world. We will eat through our mouth! We will see great distances, and we will hear through the ears on the sides of our heads. Why, our feet will be straightened! And our heads—up and free, rather than down and boxed in."

Replies the skeptic: "Nonsense. You're straining your imagination again. There is no foundation for this belief. It is only your survival instinct, an elaborate defense mechanism, a historically-conditioned subterfuge. You are looking for something to calm your fear of 'death.' There is only this world. There is no world-to-come!"

"Well then," asks the first, "what do you say it will be like?"

The second brother snappily replies with all the assurance of the slightly knowledgable: "We will go with a bang. Our world will collapse and we will sink into oblivion. No more. Nothing. Black void. An end to consciousness. Forgotten. This may not be a comforting thought, but it is a logical one."

Suddenly the water inside the womb bursts. The womb convulses. Upheaval. Turmoil. Writhing. Everything lets loose. Then a mysterious pounding—a crushing, staccato pounding. Faster, faster, lower, lower.

The believing brother exits. Tearing himself from the womb, he falls outward. The second brother shrieks—startled by the "accident" befallen his brother. He bewails and bemoans the tragedy—the death of a perfectly fine fellow. Why? Why? Why didn't he take better care? Why did he fall into that terrible abyss?

As he thus laments, he hears a head-splitting cry, and a great tumult from the black abyss, and he trembles: "Oh my! What a horrible end! As I predicted!"

Meanwhile as the skeptic brother mourns, his "dead" brother has been born into the "new" world. The head-splitting cry is a sign of health and vigor, and the tumult is really a chorus of mazel tovs sounded by the waiting family thanking God for the birth of a healthy son.[1]

Prior to Covid, I used to visit High School classrooms fairly regularly and twice a year I would guest lecture at Western. At the end of my presentation on Judaism I always reserved time for Q and A. There were two questions I knew I would get every single time. The first: Is Judaism accepting of the LGBTQ community? And the second: Does Judaism believe in an afterlife?

Since I spent quite a bit of time on Rosh Hashanah talking about Judaism and gender, and considering that Yom Kippur is a day when we contemplate our own mortality, I would like to take this time to provide one person's perspective on this second question.

The first answer I typically give when asked what happens after we die is "God only knows." It's true. There is no human who has ever lived that knows for sure what happens after we die. And if anyone says they know the answer, well, to me that's proof they have no idea what they're talking

[1] Written by Rabbi Y.M. Tuckachinsky. In The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning by Maurice Lamm

about. Is it possible that nothing happens at all outside of our organic material and energy being recycled back into the earth one way or another? Of course. After all, are humans so special that we get an extra life but the fly I swatted in my home doesn't? Maybe all living organisms have afterlives. Who knows? The fact that we are even alive right now is a miracle beyond our comprehension. I recall reading that the odds of any of us being alive are around 1 in 400 trillion, or basically zero. What more do we want? How can we possibly expect anything else? This is it and we should be humbled and grateful.

On the flip side, is it possible that something resembling an afterlife happens after we die? Sure. We live in an extraordinary universe. The study of modern physics presents theories that are just as "out there." Think of the theory of the multiverse, the idea that suggests how our universe, as infinite in size as it is, is not the only one. There may be an infinity of universes, each with their own laws of physics and chemistry. Maybe our cosmos is just one member of a much larger multitude of universes. The idea that we somehow have another life after we die isn't so crazy. How can we not entertain this possibility?

In the last Pew[2] research study on religions in America, it is reported that nearly three-quarters of Americans believe in life after death in some way while this number is closer to 40% for Jews.[3] 40% is a still a big number. However, for Jews this is not a topic we spend too much time thinking about. Aside from this moment and the rare occasions I talk about life after death in various classes, I hardly give it much thought. The afterlife is rarely discussed in communal Jewish settings, regardless of denomination. We know this is in contrast to our Christian friends who put great emphasis on going up to heaven and not down to hell.

As a textual tradition we certainly have a fair share of teachings about this topic but there isn't one that is front and center. The Torah has no direct reference to afterlife at all. It mentions a place called *Sheol* which is like an underworld, possibly located in the center of the earth, although it is never

[2] https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/11/23/views-on-the-afterlife/

[3] https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/jewish/belief-in-heaven/

formally described. It is not even clear that those who go down there are punished. In other words, it's not a "Jewish hell."

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin teaches an idea that makes sense to me as to why the Torah tends to stay from from these discussions about what comes next. He writes that there might be "a correlation between [Judaism's] non-discussion of afterlife and the fact that the Torah was revealed just after the long Jewish sojourn in Egypt. The Egyptian society from which the Hebrew slaves emerges was obsessed with death and afterlife. The holiest Egyptian literary work was called *The Book of the Dead*, while the major achievement of many Pharaohs was the erection of the giant tombs called pyramids."[4] Egyptians even wrapped themselves in order to preserve their physical bodies for the next life. He continues, "The Torah, therefore, might have been silent about afterlife out of a desire to ensure that Judaism not evolve in the direction of the death obsessed Egyptian religion."[5] The Torah's silence was a response to Egypt. This is a sound argument to me. Many of our customs, such as our eating habits, were made in response to other neighboring cultures so that we would not intermingle and lose our culture and way of life.

While the Torah might be quiet on this topic, the rabbis in the Talmud spoke at length about the "World to Come" or o*lam ha-ba*. Most likely the rabbis were talking about messianic times when all the dead will be resurrected and brought back to Jerusalem. This idea, scary as it sounds, is actually present in many prayers, including the *amidah*.

According to Maurice Lamm, author of *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, "The conception of an after-life is fundamental to the Jewish religion…The denial of the after-life constitutes a denial of the cornerstone of the faith. This concept is not merely an added detail that may lose its significance in some advanced age. It is an essential and enduring principle. Indeed, the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10:1) expressly excludes from the reward of the "world beyond" he who holds that the resurrection of the

[4] Ṭelushḳin, Joseph. *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History.* Morrow, 2003. pp. 547-548

[5] ibid., p. 548

dead is without biblical warrant. Maimonides considers this belief one of the 13 basic truths which every Jew is commanded to hold."[6]

These are some strong words that I am not sure resonate with the majority of American Jews today. I have a hard time with Lamm's assertion that one who does not believe in an afterlife denies one of the major cornerstone's of Judaism. If it were so major, how have I never taken a course on it in rabbinical school or in any rabbinic conference I've ever attended? I don't recall my childhood rabbi's ever talking about it and I definitely have no memory of it being taught in my 9 years of Jewish day school.

Lamm also writes how "the practical details of immortality are ambiguous and vague."[7] And there we have it. Judaism might teach and profess that something exists, we just don't know what that is.

Throughout the generations Jews have speculated what may happen after we die. One of the most famous teachings from our tradition is that we spend the rest of eternity in a heavenly yeshiva studying Torah with God as our instructor. I can see how this was a dream for the rabbis of the Talmud, but not so much for me. Don't get me wrong, I love Torah study, but I I'd also like to go to a ballgame to see Babe Ruth and a Bob Marley concert as well.

In another section of the Talmud we learn that "The World to Come has no eating, drinking, procreation, business, jealousy, hatred, or rivalry. Rather, the righteous sit with their crowns on their head, enjoying the shine of the Divine Presence."[8] This might also be a tough sell for some of us. Finally, the mystical tradition speaks of reincarnation and the transmigration of souls but this doesn't get much traction amongst mainstream Judaism.

One thing I love about our tradition is that it presents us with many views on this subject and chooses not to systematized them in order that each individual can come to their own conclusion on the matter.

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[6] Lamm, Maurice. *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*. Jonathan David, 2000. p. 224

[7] ibid., p. 225

[8] BT Berachot 17a

While Judaism certainly has much to say about life after death, what I have come to understand is that ultimately, it is not and should not be anyone's primary concern, but rather a topic in the backdrop of our lives. By de-emphasizing resurrection and life after death, we are able to be in the present and perform mitzvot, not for any other purpose than for their own sake. In other words, we are expected to be good people for no other reason than to make this world a better place.

Judaism is a life-affirming tradition. We are centered in *this* world. We say, *l'chayim*, to life! If there is something next, wonderful. May it exceed our expectations. But for night now, every moment of our lives should be focused on doing good. This world is broken and it is up to us to make it as good as it can be, both for ourselves, our loved ones, and the ones who will come after us. The Sages who refer to the World to Come a lot, support the fact that Judaism is about the here and now. They say, "One moment of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than the entire life of the world to come."[9]

All of this being said, I understand how belief in something coming next can be a source of comfort to us. First of all, the thought of our lives disappearing into oblivion is dispiriting. But secondly, all of us have lost loved ones and the pain lingers over the course of our lives. It comes and goes but it is ever present. There isn't anything we wouldn't do to have another moment with them; to ask them a question, to hear their voice, to smell them, to embrace them. Yom Kippur might just be the one day when we give ourselves the time and space to contemplate all of this. It's a gift.

Rabbi David Wolpe delivered a Yizkor sermon entitled, "Is There Life After Death?" just two years ago. He talked about how he had a conversation with his father, also a rabbi, about this very topic. And his father said, "I don't believe that human beings disappear." Rabbi Wolpe agrees, saying, "I don't know what happens to us, but I don't believe we disappear. Can you look in the eyes of someone you love and think, that's all synapse, no soul…*Where* they are, *how* they are, I do not know. But *that* they are, I believe."

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[9] Pirke Avot 4:17

I also don't know what happens. What I do know is that we live on through those who survive us. Some will carry our names into another generation. Some will share the stories of our lives. We also live on through our deeds. Each one of us has made an imprint on the world. Each one of us has brought a much needed sliver of light into a darkened place and these actions are remembered. This is how we live after death.

I want to end with a brief letter that one man wrote to his family while on a plane to attend the funeral of his own mother. Years later his wife found the letter with the words "Do not open until my death" on the envelope.

Sorrow Fades—Love Lingers

Death is a transition, not a tragedy—the soul simply moves in its immortal way to a new home, a new life. Our souls are linked; I feel and experience the presence of my parents though I cannot touch them. We cannot touch them because our bodies are finite and souls eternal.

My mother once said, "You will survive my death just as I survived my mother's death."

My father once said, "Prepare yourself for life, not death."

I tell you, we will meet again.

I love you.[10]

May you all be inscribed in the Book of Life.

[10] Wolfson, Ron. *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort: A Guide to Jewish Bereavement.* Jewish Lights Pub., 2005.p. 323