

JEWISH AFTER LIFE

What happens after we die?

For the most part, Judaism is ambiguous about this matter. Yet, the immortality of the soul, the World to Come—the resurrection of the dead—are found in Jewish tradition. But what these things mean, given numerous streams of Judaism coupled with the influence of Post-Modern Judaism, vagueness and subjectivity abound.

Jewish conceptions of heaven and hell as in *Gan Eden* (Garden of Eden) and *Gehinnom*, are associated with the belief in immortality and /or the World to Come. These two have also developed into their own individual concepts. Most ideas of an afterlife in Judaism developed in post-biblical times. Let's look further.

1. WHAT DOES the BIBLE SAY?

For the Jew they look at the Bible and find very few references to life after death. Remember, they only have half the book! Still, in the Old Testament we find the word, *Sheol*¹ in several biblical references (Numbers 30, 33). *Sheol* is described as a region “dark and deep,” “the Pit,” and “the Land of Forgetfulness.” It is a place where human beings descend after death. The

¹ **She'ol** ([/ˈʃiːoʊl/ SHEE-ohl](#), [/ˌɔːl/](#); Hebrew שְׁאוֹל Šə'ōl), in the [Hebrew Bible](#), is a place of darkness to which all the dead go, both the righteous and the unrighteous, regardless of the moral choices made in life, a place of stillness and darkness cut off from life and separated from God.^[1] The inhabitants of Sheol are the "shades" ([rephaim](#)), entities without personality or strength.^[2] Under some circumstances they are thought to be able to be contacted by the living, as the [Witch of Endor](#) contacts the shade of [Samuel](#) for [Saul](#), but such practices are forbidden (Deuteronomy 18:10).^[3]

While the Hebrew Bible describes Sheol as the permanent place of the dead, in the [Second Temple period](#) (roughly 500 BC – 70 AD) a more diverse set of ideas developed. In some texts, Sheol is considered to be the home of both the dead righteous and wicked, separated into respective compartments until the [Last Judgement](#) (e.g. 1 Enoch 22; Luke 16:19-31); in others, it was considered a place of punishment, meant for the wicked dead alone,^[4] and is equated with [Gehenna](#) in the [Talmud](#).^[5] When the Hebrew scriptures were translated into [Greek](#) in ancient [Alexandria](#) around 200 BC, the word "[Hades](#)" (the [Greek underworld](#)) was substituted for Sheol.^[6] This is reflected in the [New Testament](#) where Hades is both the underworld of the dead and the personification of it.^[4]

suggestion is that in this other world, *Sheol*, the deceased, although cut off from God and humankind, live on in some shadowy state of existence.

While this vision of *Sheol* is rather bleak, there is generally no concept of judgment—reward—or punishment attached to it. In fact, we would acknowledge that the gloomier books of the Bible such as Ecclesiastes and Job, insist that all of the dead go down to Sheol, whether good or evil, rich or poor, slave or free man (Job 3:11-19). Therefore, *Sheol* refers to the bowels of the earth and is portrayed as the place of the dead. At the same time, Sheol seems to be more of a metaphor for oblivion than an actual place where the dead “live” and retain consciousness.

2. THE WORLD to COME and the GARDEN of EDEN:

The World to Come (*olam haba*) is the most ubiquitous Jewish idea related to the end of days. It appears in early rabbinic sources as the ultimate reward of the individual Jew (and possibly the righteous gentile). But the world to come is far from clear in Judaism. The rabbis use the term as noted above, Olam *Ha-Ba*. It refers to a heaven-like afterlife as well as to the messianic era or the age of resurrection. It can be difficult to know which one is being referred to.

The Talmud however speaks of Olam Ha-Ba in connection to the afterlife, often using it interchangeably with the term *Gan Eden* (“the Garden of Eden”). It refers to a heavenly realm where souls reside after physical death. The use of the term Gan Eden, and its connection to “heaven”, is conceived by rabbis of an afterlife and return to the blissful existence that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden of Eden before the “fall.” Generally, in Gan Eden the human soul exists in a disembodied state until the time of bodily resurrection in the days of the Messiah.

An interesting story is found in the Talmud, in which the World to Come almost certainly refers to a heavenly afterlife. It is told of a Rabbi Joseph, the son of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who dies and returns back to life.

“His father asked him, ‘What did you see?’ He replied, ‘I beheld a world the reverse of this one; those who are on top here were below

there, and vice versa.’ He [Joshua ben Levi] said to him, ‘My son, you have seen a corrected world.’”

1. In the Kabbalistic (Jewish mystical) tradition, much discussion is found on the *voyages of the human soul* to the Garden of Eden and other heavenly realms during one’s life on earth.
2. In the *Zohar*,² the greatest of the medieval mystical works, there are many stories about the *soul-ascents* of various members of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai’s mystical brotherhood. Most often, these journeys take place at night, while the body is at rest (see, for example, *Zohar I: Parashat Vayehi*, 217b-218b).

Not surprisingly, it is not unclear what exactly the “World to Come” is and when it will exist. According to Nahmanides, among others, the World to Come is the era that will be ushered in by the resurrection of the dead, the world that will be enjoyed by the righteous who have merited additional life. Maimonides viewed the World to Come even beyond the world of the resurrected. He believed that the resurrected will eventually die a *second* death, at which point the souls of the righteous will enjoy a spiritual, bodiless existence in the presence of God. Yet in other sources, the World to Come refers to the world inhabited by the righteous immediately following death—i.e. heaven, Gan Eden. In this view, the World to Come exists *now* in some parallel universe.

² The **Zohar** (Hebrew: זוהר, lit. "Splendor" or "Radiance") is the foundational work in the literature of Jewish mystical thought known as [Kabbalah](#).¹¹ It is a group of books including commentary on the mystical aspects of the [Torah](#) (the five books of [Moses](#)) and scriptural interpretations as well as material on [mysticism](#), mythical [cosmogony](#), and mystical [psychology](#). The Zohar contains discussions of the nature of [God](#), the origin and structure of the universe, the nature of souls, redemption, the relationship of Ego to Darkness and "true self" to "The Light of God", and the relationship between the "universal energy" and man. Its scriptural [exegesis](#) can be considered an [esoteric](#) form of the [Rabbinic literature](#) known as [Midrash](#), which elaborates on the Torah.

3. HEAVEN and HELL:

Indeed, the notion of heaven and hell may be the most ambiguous of all Jewish afterlife ideas. References to Gehinnom as a fiery place of judgment can be found in the apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple period.

The Talmud embellished this idea, claiming that Gehinnom is 60 times hotter than earthly fire (Berakhot 57b). The earliest reference to Gan Eden (the Garden of Eden) and Gehinnom as a pair is probably the rabbinic statement of the 1st century sage Yochanan ben Zakkai: “There are two paths before me, one leading to Gan Eden and the other to Gehinnom (Berakhot 28b).

One notices that many questions remain for the Jew. If the sources that refer to the World to Come are referring to Gan Eden, then what is the world of the resurrected? And if judgment immediately follows death, then what need is there for the judgment that will follow the resurrection? Although some Jewish scholars have tried to clarify these ideas, it would be impossible to reconcile all the Jewish texts and sources that discuss the afterlife.

4. RESURRECTION and the MESSIAH:

When it comes to the notion of resurrection, two late biblical sources are often referenced; Daniel 12, and Isaiah 25-26. In Daniel 12:2— “Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence” — it implies that a resurrection will be followed by a day of judgment. Those judged favorably will live forever and those judged to be wicked will be punished later. Jewish tradition once again is not clear about exactly who will be resurrected, and when it will happen, and what will take place.

Some sources imply that the resurrection of the dead will occur during the Messianic era. Others indicate that a resurrection will follow the messianic era. (See above.) Similarly, according to some only the righteous will be resurrected, while according to others everyone will be resurrected and — as implied in Daniel — a day of judgment will follow.

The Daniel text probably dates to the second century BCE, and at some point, during the two centuries that followed, another afterlife idea entered

Judaism: the immortality of the soul—the notion that the human soul lives on even after the death of the body. In the Middle Ages, Jewish mystics expanded this idea, developing theories about reincarnation — the transmigration of the soul.

TWO FINAL POINTS

1. WE DON'T KNOW: LET'S MAKE OUR LIVES COUNT.

Given this brief treatment of Jewish afterlife, modern Jewish thought and discussion shields the subjects of heaven and hell leaving eternal punishment and reward obscured in Judaism. That has developed a culture within Judaism that motivates the Jew to make the most of their lives since this world is the only one that they have. They believe that upon death the soul dissipates and no longer exists, then the body returns to the dust of the earth. But in spite of numerous Jewish traditional sources of an afterlife, coupled with those found in the Scriptures, sadly, any concept of an afterlife has become a more Christian concept.

2. MESSIANISM.

Broadly speaking, the Messiah will be a descendant of King David who, in the future, will reign over a peaceful and prosperous Israel. According to some, and most prominently, Maimonides—this is all he is. The Messiah is not a wonderworker, nor is the messianic era a miraculous age. In fact, according to Maimonides,³ the Messiah will die and be succeeded by his

³ **Moses ben Maimon**, commonly known as **Maimonides** ([/maɪˈmɒniːz/ my-MON-i-deez](#))^[note 1] and also referred to by the acronym **Rambam**,^[note 2] was a medieval **Sephardic Jewish philosopher** who became one of the most prolific and influential **Torah** scholars of the **Middle Ages**. In his time, he was also a preeminent **astronomer** and physician.^{[8][9][10][11]} Born in **Córdoba, Almoravid Empire** (present-day **Spain**) on **Passover Eve**, 1135 or 1138,^{[12][13][14][15][16]} he worked as a rabbi, physician, and philosopher in **Morocco** and **Egypt**. He died in Egypt on December 12, 1204, whence his body was taken to the lower Galilee and buried in **Tiberias**.^{[17][18]}

During his lifetime, most Jews greeted Maimonides' writings on Jewish law and ethics with acclaim and gratitude, even as far away as Iraq and Yemen. Yet, while Maimonides rose to become the revered head of the **Jewish community in Egypt**, his writings also had vociferous critics, particularly in Spain. Nonetheless, he was posthumously acknowledged as among the foremost rabbinical **decisors** and philosophers in **Jewish history**, and his copious work

sons. This tradition of a political (possibly military redeemer) dates to the age of the latter prophets, who living after the peak years of the Israelite monarchy, looked forward to a time when Jewish self-rule would be restored. This of course is a carry-over from Yeshua's days that became their stumbling stone.

Other thinkers and texts stress the utopian, not the restorative nature of the messianic era and suggest that the age of the Messiah will be a super-natural time. According to one Talmudic source, humans will have only good inclinations in the messianic era (Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 52a.)

PRAYER POINTS: Let's pray that the eyes of the Jewish people are opened, and the truth of Heaven and Hell is real; that eternal punishment and reward is discovered to be the end-point of humankind's journey. That every knee will bow and give an account. *"That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth,"¹¹ and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* Philippians 2:10-11

comprises a cornerstone of Jewish scholarship. His fourteen-volume *Mishneh Torah* still carries significant canonical authority as a codification of *Talmudic* law. He is sometimes known as "ha Neshet ha Gadol" (the great eagle) in recognition of his outstanding status as a *bona fide* exponent of the *Oral Torah*.