

LIFE AFTER DEATH

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel June 24, 2018

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Everyone is curious and interested to know about the nature of the afterlife and if it even exists at all. If people were sure that there is life after their existence in this world, then many individuals would behave quite differently. And if it could be proved that there is absolutely no existence beyond this world, then many people who are currently believers would also drastically change their behavior. Without life beyond this world and the promise of rewards in the beyond, there is little reason not to "live it up" while one can in this world without worrying about the consequences. The entire question of morality, reward and punishment and "why bad things happen to good people" would be difficult, if not impossible, to explain if nothing exists beyond this world. The very purpose of man's existence is tied to this question. Like most major religions in the world, Judaism emphatically believes in an afterlife,¹ but the character of that existence is unique to Judaism.

WHY IS IT NOT MENTIONED EXPLICITLY IN THE TORAH

If afterlife is part of basic Jewish belief, then why is this concept not mentioned specifically in the Torah? One possible answer is that the Torah's rewards concentrate on the tangible, because all people can directly relate to these benefits. Thus, the second paragraph of the Shema prayer,² as a reward for observing the commandments, promises abundant rain in its proper time and many crops. In another portion of the Torah,³ as a reward for observing the mitzvot-commandments, G-d promises not only a prosperous economy, but also peace in the Land without a threat from enemies or wild animals. These are all rewards that can be seen with the eye and felt with the senses. Other promises full of spirituality and the Next World might not inspire common people to observance, because these rewards are so distant and intangible. Perhaps that is why the Talmud informs⁴ us that all the prophets did not prophesy about the Next World at all, as it might be too difficult to comprehend or relate to.

Nevertheless, there are allusions to the afterlife in the Tanach. The place called *Sheol* or *Sheolah* is a reference to some kind of existence beyond this world. When Jacob refused to be comforted believing Joseph to be dead, he states that he will be mourning as he enters *Sheol*.⁵ The followers of the wicked Korach were swallowed up alive and went to *Sheol*.⁶ Towards the end of the Torah,⁷ it states that one should "choose life so that you may live." This simple reading of the verse is either redundant or makes no sense. Many commentaries have understood the second reference to life in the verse as referring to life after this world. Certainly, in the later prophets, there are more clear references to a world beyond this world. Ecclesiastes writes that the soul returns to G-d after death.⁸ It is written in Daniel⁹ that many people will go on to an

¹ Sanhedrin 90a

² Deuteronomy 11:13-15

³ Deuteronomy 26:3-9

⁴ Berachot 34b

⁵ Genesis 37:35

⁶ Numbers 16:32-33

⁷ Deuteronomy 30:19

⁸ Ecclesiastes 12:7

⁹ Daniel 12:2

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everlasting life. In the main prayer of each service, the Shmoneh Esreh,¹⁰ the concept of resurrection, i.e. G-d bringing people who died back to life, figures prominently and is repeated, in different forms, four times in just one blessing.

Therefore, a form of existence beyond this world is clearly part of Jewish belief. What exactly is that existence and what will it be like? The truth is that one cannot know with complete accuracy what the World to Come will be like. The Talmud relates¹¹ that one of the reasons that the prophets did not prophecy about the World to Come is that no one has seen the World to Come and has come back to tell about it. However, based on various sources and traditions, there can be some understanding of what life will be like after this existence.

THE NATURE OF AFTERLIFE

Although no one has technically gone to the beyond and then returned to inform us, there are some people who have come close. Because of advances in medical science, many people who have technically died have been brought back to life a few minutes later. There are certain characteristics that seem to be common to their experience in those few moments while "dead." From their encounters, some insights into the nature of afterlife may be gleaned.

One aspect all these people seem to have in common is that they can see themselves and their bodies, as well as all the other people in the room, as if looking down from above. Another common experience is that they head down a tunnel of light, to which they are drawn, and sometimes they see others who have previously died. Finally, they report that it is a very peaceful experience. Are these experiences accurate, in light of what the Jewish sources reveal? The truth is that these encounters might very well reflect the "Jewish" experience as well, passed down through tradition.

Long ago, the Mishna¹² taught that this world is only a vestibule for the world to come and, until recently, this was understood in the figurative sense. However, given the experiences of those who "died" and have come back to life, the imagery of the Mishna suggesting a long hall or tunnel connecting this world with the Next World, may now be understood literally. The idea of a blinding light in the world beyond can also be found in the Talmud,¹³ which states that there will be a light as bright as the sun for the righteous in the Next World. The verse in Daniel¹⁴ says that as the body returns to dust, the soul rises to G-d, and it that the soul seems to be cognizant of what is happening to the body. All the characteristics, then, mentioned by those who have returned after "dying" are indeed compatible with Jewish sources.

THE JEWISH VIEW OF THE WORLD TO COME

The average person's concept of the Next World or the World to Come, known in Hebrew as *Olam Habah*, is usually an image of an idyllic, beautiful existence, often based on an understanding learned as a child and retained in adulthood. Despite the fact that the true nature of this existence cannot be ascertained with any certainty, numerous Jewish sources give a fairly detailed picture of the World to Come.

¹⁰ Second blessing of the Amidah (Shmoneh Esreh)

¹¹ Berachot 34b

¹² Avot 4:16

¹³ Pesachim 2a

¹⁴ Daniel 12:2

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The Talmud states that man's understanding of events in the World to Come will eventually become crystal clear.¹⁵ All that is not understood in this world, specifically the actions of G-d which are not comprehended, will be grasped and understood clearly in the World to Come. In this world, says the Talmud, we make one blessing on events that occur which are good and another blessing for events that we perceive to be bad. In the Next World, we will understand that all of these events are truly good, and recite only the blessing for good. In this world, then, our judgments of "good" and "bad" are subjectively arrived at, based on our own circumstances and viewpoint, because we do not have the ability to see the entire picture. Man's subjectivity is partially a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, when they ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Subsequent events were no longer seen as true and false (objective), but as good and evil (subjective). That objectivity will be restored in the World to Come.

In the Next World, each person will be judged based solely on his or her actions in this life. The righteous will be rewarded.¹⁶ A "videotape" of all the events in a person's life will pass before each individual,¹⁷ recalling the actions and moral activity of that person. What is the nature of the reward for those who deserve it? Unlike the commonly held belief of what a world of physical paradise would be, the Talmud¹⁸ says that there will be no physical activity or physical pleasures at all in the Next World – no eating, drinking, sexual activity, hatred or feelings of jealousy. The righteous will "sit" with crowns on their "heads" feasting on the brightness of the Divine Presence. Perhaps the Torah and Prophets did not spell it out because we cannot really comprehend what this means.

This reward might sound boring and not worth all the effort it takes to act with goodness in this world. The rabbis, aware that the average person may not be impressed by the description of this type of reward, compared the nature of this spiritual reward in the Next World with the physical rewards people can relate to in this world. A person should imagine all the physical pleasures he or she enjoyed during his or her entire life and cram them into one minute. This minute of intense pleasure should be added to the compacted "minutes" of pleasure experienced by all the people in the world alive today and then contract all that intense pleasure further into one minute. All these "minutes" of pleasure of all the generations who ever lived should be added together and crammed further into one moment of unbelievable pleasure. The Mishna¹⁹ then says that this unimaginable minute of extremely intense physical pleasure, encompassing all physical pleasures of all people from all generations, will be less than one minute of spiritual pleasure experienced by one individual in the World to Come. Thus, while man cannot fathom what this spiritual pleasure will actually be, by comparison to physical pleasure, it will be much more intense. While it is true that man cannot truly know what spiritual pleasure is like, we do have one clue from this world. The rabbis have said²⁰ that if a person observes Shabbat properly and feels the spirituality of that day, then that feeling is one sixtieth of the feeling in the World to Come.

Although alluded to above, there are specific sources which imply that the spirit or soul of a person is aware of and feels the body, even after death. The Talmud²¹ says that the pain of the worms in the body

¹⁵ Pesachim 50a

¹⁶ Avot 2:16

¹⁷ Taanit 11a

¹⁸ Berachot 17a

¹⁹ Avot 4:17

²⁰ Berachot 57b

²¹ Shabbat 132a and Berachot 18b

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after death is felt (by the soul), just as a needle is felt by a live body. An additional allusion to feeling physical pain, even after death, refers²² to the person who mistreats the righteous in this world, who will feel some sort of smoke and fire in the Next World.

ATTAINING THE WORLD TO COME

Since the spiritual reward for the Next World is so great, it is certainly a desirable place to try to enter. How does one attain the World to Come? As quoted above,²³ all Jews start out initially with a share in the World to Come. What, then, differentiates a righteous Jew from a less righteous Jew – if they both will attain the World to Come anyway? What incentive is there for a Jew to be a better person in this world, if he or she is guaranteed a place in the World to Come in any case?

While it is true that every Jew starts out with a share in the World to Come, this share can be lost through improper actions, thoughts or beliefs.²⁴ In addition, it does not say that each person's share will be equal. The size of a person's share will be directly related to the degree of good behavior of the individual in this world. One rabbi explained the differences among people by comparing the World to Come to a theater. Some people, who lost their share, never even get a ticket of entrance. Others receive a ticket to get in, but remain in the lobby and never see the performance. Others, who have a greater share, get into the hall, but have seats in the balcony. Those more deserving sit in the orchestra section. The more deserving still, sit closer to the stage. Those most deserving get to actually be on the stage, very close to the Divine Presence. Thus, there are many distinctions between Jews, and although everyone starts out with a share, each person's share is fully dependent on his behavior in this world.

HOW DOES ONE ATTAIN THE WORLD TO COME?

Some people, says the Talmud,²⁵ can attain the World to Come in one moment, through one action in this world. For others, says the Talmud, it takes an entire lifetime. Thus, sometimes the quality of particular moral actions might make a person deserving. However, man cannot know in advance which particular actions make a person deserving of the Next World. There is a Talmudic story²⁶ about a man who was totally non-observant of the commandments, but Rabbi Beroka was informed by Elijah that this person would attain the World to Come. Puzzled, Rabbi Beroka investigated and found that the man was a jailer. Whenever a Jewish girl was put in jail, he always took steps to insure that she would not be given to the gentiles who desired these young women. For this single act, the man attained the World to Come.

There are various references in the Talmud and Midrash about which particular actions and mitzvot will help a person attain a share in the World to Come, although the reasons for each are not easily explained or understood. One passage²⁷ says one who recites the Shmoneh Esreh prayer immediately after mentioning redemption in the prayers following the Shema, will attain the World to Come. Another passage²⁸ says one who gives honor to those who have wisdom will attain the World to Come, based on a verse in Isaiah.²⁹ Yet

²² Bava Batra 75a

²³ Sanhedrin 90a

²⁴ Sanhedrin 90a

²⁵ Avodah Zara 18a

²⁶ Taanit 22a

²⁷ Berachot 4b

²⁸ Bava Batra 10b

²⁹ Isaiah 24:23

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another passage³⁰ claims that the person who pleases his or her teachers will attain the World to Come. Still another Talmudic passage³¹ indicates that one who is meek, humble and never claiming any greatness for his or her Torah learning will attain the World to Come. One Midrash³² gives a formula of the types of actions that will help a person enter the World to Come. It states that at the gates of the World to Come, a person will be asked if he or she did acts of kindness such as donating food and clothing to the poor, helping orphans and fulfilling the general commandment of Tzedaka-charity. If a person did these things, he or she will be let in.

With all the sources indicating the specific details about its existence, the topic of afterlife will still remain a scary and tentative one for most people, and the entire notion is doubted by many others. There is always fear of the unknown. There is a story³³ about two brothers who were arguing vehemently about whether there will be an existence after this life. One brother believed that the future life that will be better than this existence. The other brother argued, based on logic, that there is no proof that anything continues after this life. They argued for days until the brother who believed in a future world, left the present existence with a howling cry. The remaining brother took this as a sign and proof that he was correct – there is no life beyond this life. The story ends by revealing that these two brothers were actually in the womb, arguing if there is an existence after life in the womb. The brother who "died" with a cry actually was born into this world with this cry. The same way that life in the womb is followed by a "better life," following the "death" of that existence in the womb, so, too, after death in this world, there is also a continuation of life in the Next World in a different and better form.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is "to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way." Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and three grandchildren.

³⁰ Shabbat 153a

³¹ Sanhedrin 88b

³² Midrash, Tehilim 118:17

³³ Y.M. Tukachinsky, Geshet Hachaim (Jerusalem, 1960)