

Which Is The Real World?

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In 1999, a very popular science fiction film, "The Matrix," postulated that the world we live in is actually a simulated reality, created by computers and other machines. The "Real World" is outside this existence, and only once a person is "unplugged" from the Matrix we live in can he or she experience the real world. At the time, many believed this movie to be related to the Christian idea of the Messiah, since the writers, brothers Alan and Andy Wachowski, are Christians and some of the references in the film are Christological, such as name of the main female protagonist, Trinity, as well as other references. And yet, it seems that many of the ideas presented in the film are Jewish in nature. Does Judaism believe in more than one world? If so, which is the "real word" and what is the relationship between the different worlds? We will see that normative Jewish sources spoke about these and other related issues long before films were even invented.

IS THERE MORE THAN ONE WORLD IN JEWISH THOUGHT?

It is clear from many mainstream sources that Judaism believes in at least two distinct worlds. The Mishna¹ states that this world is only considered a hallway in comparison to the Next World, which is compared to the main house. The use of "This World" and "Next World" numerous times in the Talmud² shows us that Judaism clearly believes in two distinct worlds, with the Next World much more spiritual than this world. (See the chapter "[Life After Death](#)" for more details about the existence in that Next World). Another Mishna³ discusses the spiritual advantages of the kinds of pleasures in the Next World over This World, while This World has the advantage of actions and good deeds that do not exist in the Next World. The Torah⁴ alludes to both worlds when it says in one verse that we should "choose life, so that we may live." The verse makes absolutely no sense, even in its simple translation (how would be rewarded with life if we choose life?), unless G-d is speaking about choosing one kind of life in the This World, so that we may live a fulfilling life in the Next World. Clearly, then, Judaism believes in "This World" and also the "Next World."

Unlike in the film "the Matrix," people in This World should be aware of a spiritual world above our world (not necessary physically above). In the film, no one living on this planet was aware of another existence. But Jews are supposed to be aware of what is above them, i.e. the "Next World."⁵ And Jews are told about the superior spiritual rewards of the "Next World" as seen from the sources presented, even though these spiritual awards are beyond our comprehension. Even Jewish law values the Next World over This World. When a child finds two lost objects, one belonging to his father and one belonging to his teacher, to whom shall the child first return the lost object? The

¹ Mishna Avot 4:16

² Berachot 8a, 16b, Shabbat 63a, 127a are just a few notable examples

³ Avot 4:17

⁴ Deuteronomy 30:19

⁵ Mishna Avot 2:1

Talmud states⁶ that the child is obligated to return the lost object to his teacher first, since the father “only” brought him into to This World, while the teacher brings the child into the Next World (unless the father is also a teacher, and then, of course, he receives the object back first). Clearly, then, even children from a very early age are taught to be aware of both worlds and that the Next World is superior to This World.

WHICH WORLD IS THE ‘REAL’ WORLD?

In the film “the Matrix” the real world is clearly not this world, which is only a fictitious simulation of reality. But what does Judaism believe? Clearly, there are two worlds, both in the film and in Judaism. Which one is the “real” world in Jewish thought? Which world is the “true” world?

Logically, this world, which is called “*Olam Hazei* -- This World” should be the real world. Our existence, in the form of flesh and blood, seems to indicate the true or real existence. And yet, the sources seem to say just the opposite. It is our world which is the “fake” world and the Next World which is the “real” world. When Rabbi Yosef had a near-death experience,⁷ he returned to This World and said that This World is upside down, and the Next World is the world of reality. As an example, about things in this world that we think are “bad” or “evil,” Rabbi Yosef says that when the same things are seen in the Next World (objectively), they will be blessed as events that are good, since they will be viewed from the true reality perspective. The passage continues and says that items that are considered important and very expensive in This World will be considered worthless and unimportant in the Next World and vice versa. On a similar passage⁸, Rashi explains⁹ the details of this concept. In This World, people value money wealth and honor. In the Next World, none of these will be of value. Rather, Torah learning will be seen as the ultimate value. Rabbeinu Gershom¹⁰ says that only wisdom will be honored in the Next World, unlike in This World. In the same vein, King David said¹¹ that This World is compared to night, because nothing is clear and easy to see, while the Next World is compared to light because everything there will be clear as day. The values in this world are ephemeral and opposite of the true values, something all will agree to once they would be able to see things clearly and objectively. That is why the Mishna¹² says that when we exit This World and enter the Next World, it is not money and riches that will accompany us, for these are worthless in the Next World, the world of truth. Rather, our Torah learning and good deeds are the only commodities of true worth. That is why another commentary calls This World the World of Lies,¹³ because we misunderstand true values here, and label bad things as good and vice versa. From all these sources, it is clear that Judaism believes that the “real” world in which truth will be seen and appreciated, will only take place in the Next World.

WHY IS THIS WORLD NOT THE REAL WORLD?

Why is it that we cannot see things here, in our earthly existence, as clearly as we will be able to do so in Next World? Why is it that our evaluation of priorities and beliefs will be accurate only in the Next World? Maimonides¹⁴ explains that originally, when Adam and Eve were created, they indeed

⁶ Bava Metzia 33a

⁷ Pesachim 50a

⁸ Bava Batra 10a

⁹ Rashi commentary on Bava Batra 10a

¹⁰ Rabbeinu Gershom commentary on Bava Batra 10a

¹¹ Pesachim 2b

¹² Mishna Avot 6:9

¹³ Tzror Hamor commentary on Genesis 24:1

¹⁴ Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed 1:2

were able to see everything accurately and evaluate everything in this world correctly and precisely. To them, everything was seen not as good and bad, but as truth and falsehood, and they understood values in the same manner that we today see empirical truths in science. (The Law of Gravity is not considered either good or bad, just true). But, after Adam and Eve gave in to their physical desires and ate from the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil,” everything changed. No longer was everything in this world empirical. Truth and lies were replaced with “good and evil,” which are subjective terms. What one person calls good can be another person’s bad. But ultimate truth is provable, incontrovertible and objective. That is how man will once again view the world in the Next World, the “Real” World.

Another modern commentary¹⁵ continues this analysis, when he says that this is the World of Lies because man can rationalize anything to be true for him (even though it is clearly untrue), and, therefore, he will believe something that is not actually so. Another Rabbi says¹⁶ that in the Next World, people will be able to evaluate everything without rationalizations and truly understand their iniquities and actions. That is why it is called the World of Truth. Maharal gets to the heart of the matter when he writes¹⁷ that since this world is the place of physicality, it is man's physical desires that confuse him and cause him to see things imperfectly. Only in the Next World, the World of Truth, because it is a world of spirituality, will people be able to see things accurately. Michtav Ma-Eliyahu explains¹⁸ that this was the actual punishment for the sin of Adam and Eve in eating the forbidden fruit – i.e., they were deprived of true judgment in This World and were no longer able to see things objectively. This is why, according to some commentaries,¹⁹ each soul is reluctant to come down from the Next World and enter the body (before a baby is born). The soul realizes that in this flawed, physical world, the world will be seen imperfectly instead of in its reality, as in the World of Truth.

CAN THE WORLD BELOW AFFECT THE WORLD(S) ABOVE?

In the film “the Matrix,” even though “this world” was a mere simulation, when events transpired and were plugged into the Real World below, the outcomes of these events indeed affected the “Real World.” Thus, if someone became injured in that simulated Matrix, the person in the real world felt the pain. Similarly, if the person were killed in the simulated Matrix, the person actually died in the Real World. Would that process be accurate in Judaism as well? Could this world, the World of Lies, have an impact on the “Real World” above as well?

Since the world above is the “World of Truth,” logic would seem to tell us that the spiritual world above should be able to impact our world, and not the reverse. And yet, Judaism believes that man, down below in the physical world, has the ability to impact everything that goes on above, just as in the film. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, who lived in the 19th century, expounded on this theme,²⁰ clearly stating that everything that a person does down below has a profound impact on the many worlds above, and that people's actions have true cosmic impact. Even though it seems contra-intuitive, this concept is backed up by many traditional sources. The process to affect reality in the

¹⁵ Ben Yehoyada commentary on Pesachim 50a

¹⁶ Kaf HaChaim Palagi 24

¹⁷ Maharal, Tiferet Yisrael, chapter 59

¹⁸ Michtav Mai-Eliyahu, Section I, page 304

¹⁹ Ruach Chaim commentary on Mishna Avot 4:22

²⁰ Nefesh HaChaim 1:4

universe begins in this world with each of man's actions. Thus, for example, the Talmud says²¹ that only when Jews act in a righteous manner here, down below, will the world above deem us to be righteous. Similarly, the spiritual Jerusalem above cannot be redeemed and visited by G-d until Jews redeem the physical Jerusalem below.²² The world above follows the lead of man's actions below. That is why, when people impurify themselves below, they are then defiled from above. But the reverse is true, as well. When individuals begin the process of holiness below, then the world above expands their holiness.²³ Nefesh HaChaim²⁴ carries this idea much further when he says that man's thoughts and our actions can directly affect the heavens and many worlds, both for good and for evil. Then he quotes the verse in Psalms²⁵ that is usually translated as, "The L-rd is your keeper; the L-rd is your shade upon your right hand." But Nefesh HaChaim interprets this verse literally²⁶ and says that G-d is our shadow. Just as a shadow must follow perfectly how the original image moves, G-d and the worlds above must follow us, and our actions below directly affect what is occurring above. This idea is not as far-fetched as it seems. We can see the same idea printed in most *Siddurim*-Prayer Books. When Jews recite the Omer blessing each night between Pesach and Shavuot, the last paragraph cites numerous mystical ideas.²⁷ Many Jews recite these words that say: "In the merit of the counting of the Omer, may I repair the corresponding place in the heavens, and may it be purified and made holy above. And through this action may all the worlds above be influenced and repaired in every way..."

Therefore, while our world is not the "real" world because man cannot see and evaluate everything objectively due to his or her physicality, Judaism believes that people have the power to affect the spiritual worlds above, for the good and for the bad, based on daily actions.

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 in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.

²¹ Taanit 8a

²² Taanit 5a

²³ Yoma 39a

²⁴ Nefesh HaChaim 1:3

²⁵ Psalms 121:5

²⁶ Nefesh HaChaim 1:7

²⁷ Counting of the Omer prayer, last paragraph