

What Jewish Spirituality Teaches About Afterlife

November 17, 2006

By Rabbi Stuart W. Gershon
Copyright © 2006 Temple Sinai, Summit, NJ

Abstract: "Does it surprise you to learn that Judaism asserts a belief in afterlife? Some of us have been taught that Judaism has no such concept. Some of us have been taught that Judaism is exclusively a "this-worldly" religion while Christianity is exclusively an "other-worldly" religion. In truth, both religions have been misrepresented to you. In a few moments, I will explain why."

My teaching for tonight is "what Jewish spirituality teaches about afterlife." I begin by posing a question: Does it surprise you to learn that Judaism asserts a belief in an afterlife?

Some of us have been taught that Judaism has no such concept. Some of us have been taught that Judaism is exclusively a "this-worldly" religion while Christianity is exclusively an "other-worldly" religion. In truth, both religions have been misrepresented to you, and in a few moments, I'll explain why.

Let's briefly explore the intellectual history of the concept of afterlife in Judaism. First of all, no concept of afterlife can be found in the Torah. Afterlife is a post-biblical concept. The concepts of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead first came into prominence within Judaism during the revolt of the Maccabees against the persecutions of Antiochus IV Euphron, the villain of the Chanukkah story. As we all know, the Maccabees won their famous fight for Jewish political independence from the Greco-Syrian empire. What we do not often recognize is the human cost by which our people's freedom was won. Many Jews suffered martyrdom before and during that revolt.

When our people from that era gazed at the eight lights of the Chanukkah menorah it was not dreidels and children's fantasies that they saw. No, it was a far more somber miracle they perceived. They saw reflected in the Chanukkah lights their Jewish belief in the immortality of the soul and bodily resurrection.

Indeed, in antiquity, the menorah was the primary Jewish symbol of belief in afterlife. Even non-Jews had the symbol of the menorah placed on their tombstones, so well-known and so well-respected was the Jewish concept of afterlife.

A few centuries after the Maccabean period, the rabbis of rabbinic Judaism, the form of Judaism that we have inherited, declared belief in resurrection and the immortality of the soul to be core doctrines of the Jewish faith.

So important were these beliefs to the rabbis that they enshrined them in our prayerbook. In which prayers are these beliefs embedded? In the *Tefillah*, which we prayed earlier this evening, in the section called *Gevurot*, God's powers, there is a reference to God's "keeping faith with those who sleep in the dust." This is an unmistakable reference to the resurrection of the dead.

The belief in afterlife can be found in the blessing after the reading from the Torah scroll. on Shabbat morning. That blessing ends with the phrase *vechayei olam natah betocheynu* – God has “implanted eternal life within our grasp.” Every time we come up to the Torah for an aliyah and say this closing blessing, we have affirmed the Jewish belief in an afterlife.

Generally speaking, we don’t think of Judaism as having dogmas. But resurrection and the immortality of the soul were two of them in the rabbinic period, and still are among Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Why, then, were many of us taught that Judaism has no concept of afterlife? Ever since the 18th century, when Jews fled the ghetto and began a wholesale abandonment of Jewish ritual observance, the focus of Jewish identity had no choice but to shift from ritual practice to theological belief. In other words, if Jews no longer practiced their religion differently than Christians, then all that is left to make Jews different is theological beliefs. If Christians believe in afterlife, Jews cannot. It was that simple. It was solely for the purpose of stemming the tide of Jewish assimilation that some of us were taught that Judaism has no belief in afterlife. Now we understand that the opposite is true.

“Many of us have forgotten,” writes Rabbi Marc Gellman, “that the afterlife is a fundamental tenet in Judaism. We have chosen to abandon the most hopeful belief in Jewish tradition in nearly every Reform pulpit, and thus in nearly every Jewish heart. And because of our forgetting, I have seen Jews die with less serenity, grace, and hope, and with more agony, than Christians who believe in heaven.”

To be sure, both Judaism and Christianity ultimately went in different directions with the concepts of resurrection and the soul’s immortality. Christianity took the view that a resurrection had taken place, that the soul was more pure than the body, and that afterlife was a “better place.” Judaism insisted that the resurrection would not happen until the end of days, that the body was not inherently sinful, and that both this world and the next were precious.

While the concepts of resurrection and afterlife are so critical to Christianity, they did not originate with Christianity. Christianity imported them from its mother religion, Judaism. Jewish spiritual tradition teaches that physical death is real -- but death is not the end. We live on in other ways. When we live, the light of God lives within us. And when we die, our soul lives on within the light of God. *Ner Adonai nishmat adam*. “The light of God is the soul of a human being.”

But can we as liberal Jews believe in something as unscientific as the resurrection of the dead? The ancients, not all but most, believed in a literal resurrection, as do many fundamentalists today of all stripes, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish. From a liberal perspective, the concept of resurrection should not be taken literally. To do so is to miss the point. The concept of resurrection is a spiritual intuition, a tantalizing glimpse into the right-brain of our collective human consciousness.

What I believe the ancient concept of resurrection is getting at in modern terminology is the power and the mystery of genetics. Through our genes, God does resurrect the dead. My son,

Aaron, and I are almost clones. It's a bit uncanny: we look alike, talk alike, walk alike. After I'm gone, someone just like me will still walk on this earth. Through Aaron, I will know immortality. In this sense, I believe that a modern, scientific concept of resurrection can not only make sense to us, but deeply move us all.