

## THE OTHER SIDE OF DEATH: PART 1

What happens to people after they die? Is there some sort of continuation ... somewhere, somehow? What follows is the beginning of Back-to-Basics-Judaism's answer.

People have always hoped for or feared a life after death and in some societies they made very careful preparations for it as well. It's the most natural of questions. Will at least my consciousness "outlive" my body? What is Judaism's original response. I say "original" because many new beliefs have crept into our religion mostly as a result of surrounding influences.

You would think that the Five Books of Moses would have something to say about life after death since they pretty much cover everything needed in this life; but not a hint is supplied to us. Why is that? Is it an unfortunate omission or some additional wisdom?

I say the latter. The lack of guidance about the afterlife is intentional and there could be two reasons for this. First, we are not psychologically prepared for or could not logically comprehend the post-death universe and second, contemplating and preparing for death is unproductive and even harmful if such thoughts and activities take from us the time and energy needed for making the most of this life.

It seems that the message of the Five Books of Moses is that we are not supposed to concern ourselves with after-death scenarios. Now this is not easy when we think about our own impending death and those deaths that we witness in the course of our lives. After developing our personalities or developing a love of other persons', it is hard to think of our or their coming to an abrupt halt. Of course, the Five Books don't say that there is no life after death. They simply offer no material to encourage consolation, trepidation, fascination or even meditation. Basic Judaism simply suggests that we put those questions aside. We most certainly are not told to fear death or to welcome it.

As centuries passed, the temptation on the part of Judaism's leaders to offer some hope could not be resisted. Talk of a "world to come" turned from a utopian plan to an after-life wish, complete with bones of the long-dead becoming activated. The notion of a heaven has never been much clarified by our writers and of course hell never did become a Jewish belief. What we have today is a wide assortment of ideas about death that are offered by rabbis and held by the Jewish people.

Another problem was that surrounding religions were offering attractive possibilities. Some dangled a paradise in front of the worried and some even went so far as to promise the continuation of families and wealth. Still others left open a never ending chain of interesting lives. All of this was too difficult for Jews to ignore.

Many people have taken the supposedly rational approach and argued that there has to be a heaven and hell so that the injustices of this life can be repaired. This is a bit of imaginative problem-solving but incorrect, in my opinion. It is a simplistic and convenient attempt to answer the question of why bad things happen to good people. I will write about this stumbling block of most religions at a later time but am suggesting now that life after death is not the appropriate resolution of the chaotic injustice we encounter in this life. I am aware of the grinding hardships of the poor, the unreasonable pain of the ill, the thankless good deeds of many, and the frequent triumph of evil, but none of these come with some guarantee of pre- or post-death correction, at least according to basic Judaism.

So, gradually it seems, Judaism felt it had to start competing in the afterlife marketplace. The mention of a future after death became more frequent in the daily and special prayers. For example the raising of the dead is mentioned several times in the first few paragraphs of every Jewish religious service' centerpiece. I would say that according to basic Judaism, this increasing attention to the after-life is not a good thing. It is a distraction in that it coddles us and keeps us from fully dedicating our love, strength, creativity, rationality, and other resources to the improvement of this world. "Let the next life take care of itself", our founding document is telling us. Make heaven on earth. That is the correct Jewish preoccupation.

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