

Life After Death

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Torah does not explicitly say there is life after death. Which seems strange given the tremendous significance all the surrounding the Middle Eastern cultures attached to the idea. Just think of the Greeks and Hades, the Egyptians and their Pyramids, and the Babylonian Ziggurats—all testaments to the significance of what they thought happened to the body after death. Not to mention Hindu concepts of the transmigration of souls and reincarnation, as well as the Buddhist graduation to another level of understanding and “life”.

Perhaps the Bible chose quite intentionally to focus on how to live life in the present rather than spend any time on the intangibles of something beyond the physical world. Perhaps it simply assumed such a universal belief as unnecessary of expansion. And of course there is the possibility that it simply did not think it an idea of any merit.

The counter argument to the deduction from silence is that there are references to the Fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, dying and being “gathered to their people” (for example, Genesis 35:29). Talk of “spirit” in its various forms implies something beyond the physical, and odd phrases such as “Until Shilo Comes” (Genesis 49) are usually understood in a transcendental way.

The Oral Tradition however, placed, and continues to place, tremendous emphasis on the importance of the Next World and read into all kinds of texts, hints however improbable, such as “Then Moses sang” (Exodus 15), reworking the ambiguity of the tenses to say that “he will return and sing again”.

Both the Talmud and Maimonides conflate the idea of resurrection and afterlife. The Mishna in Sanhedrin talks about those who have no part of the afterlife and then proceeds to discuss those who reject the idea of resurrection. What has one to do with other unless they conflated both ideas?

Maimonides was accused of not believing in resurrection because he did not mention it at all in his major Halachic work, “Yad HaChazaka”. Instead, in Hilchot Teshuva, Chapter 8, he talks about the significance of The World to Come, about those who cultivate their souls enabling them to continue on a spiritual level after death, while others simply obliterate their souls through neglect and die like animals. Thus he fell afoul of those who thought souls indestructible, and the kabbalists who claimed Jewish souls had an eternal life of their own.

Maimonides was no stranger to controversy, but even he buckled under pressure and wrote a specific little pamphlet reiterating his belief in resurrection, though even he could not really explain rationally how it worked. And he made up for it by listing resurrection in his simple handy guide to Jewish

thought, the "13 Principles of Faith", but surprisingly makes no mention there of life after death.

For many Talmudic thinkers, the only way one could explain reward and punishment, disasters affecting the innocent, or why good people suffer and bad people prosper, was through the idea that accounts are settled in the afterlife. But still, the whole idea is so difficult to explain, because as the Talmud itself says, "No human has ever seen it, only God" (Sanhedrin 99a etc). Nevertheless, Rebbi Yosef the son of Rebbi Yehoshua Ben Levi took ill, had a sort of near death experience, and reported that he had been to the afterlife and returned and discovered that those on top on earth were on the lowest rungs up there and vice versa (Talmud Pesachim 50a).

To switch cultures, Aristotle said that one's immortality was in one's children, and other Greek thinkers talked about the legacy of the good works one leaves behind.

All these thoughts came back to me as I sat shiva last week in Jerusalem for my younger brother, Mickey, who founded Yakar and died at the early age of 63. He was fortunate in one way to have a wife, sons, and daughters who will continue his work; and the hundreds of people who came to pay tribute spoke of the impact that he had on their lives that continues to vivify them long after the initial inspiration passed.

Who knows about his soul, where it is, or on what journey it has now embarked? What we can say without doubt is that his memory lives on in the hearts and minds of so many of the living. What could be more immortal than that?