

### Intuitions of the World-to-Come

The nature of the World-to-Come is unclear. Nevertheless, there are diverse opinions about the specifics of the future state of the soul. The Book of Daniel promises resurrection during the messianic era as a reward for the righteous. The Talmud describes it as a place marked by the bliss of being absorbed in God's presence. Medieval Jewish scholars believed that while the body is temporal, the soul is immortal. In Jewish mystical writings, from the twelfth century onward, there is a claim of reincarnation. In many traditional prayer books, there is a nighttime prayer that asks God to forgive us for our sins in this life and in any previous life.

Despite variations in the particulars of the nature of the World- to-Come, the messianic era, resurrection and reincarnation, the Jewish tradition is consistent in its belief that we are more than our bodies and that there is life beyond death. Judaism is also consistent in teaching that how we live now matters, both in terms of God's expectations of us and for the trajectory of life to come.

### Belief in Survival of the Soul Makes a Difference in Our Lives

According to Jewish tradition, when we die it is not the end. Our soul emerges from our body at the point of death as a butterfly from a cocoon and continues to exist in a realm beyond this one. For many people, knowing this affirms their personal faith as well as their faith in the Jewish tradition.

Others find comfort by considering that this life is not all there is. Despite sadness, death feels less tragic knowing that there is life after life.

Rabbi Maurice Lamm, a contemporary authority on death from a Jewish perspective, writes: "Death has meaning if life had meaning. If one is not able to live, will he be able to die?" If we live our lives more responsibly and compassionately because of a belief in an accounting at the end of days then our lives have meaning and purpose. Moreover, if there is a personal consciousness that survives this plane of existence, then there is an additional reason to believe in a transcendent and unifying consciousness. Cultivating a relationship with the Divine through ritual deeds and acts of compassion adds wholeness and holiness to the days of our lives.

Although there is no conclusive proof for what happens after we die, our sacred texts and the folk wisdom of our tradition affirm a belief in survival of the soul. Jewish tradition teaches that we are here for a unique purpose and each day of our lives is a precious gift from the Divine that we should celebrate and use responsibly.

Life after  
life: Does  
our soul  
survive?

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Adapted from "Do Jews Believe in the Soul's Survival?" by Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz and used with permission of Jewish Lights Publishing



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### What Will Happen Once We Die

We, who live an earthly, embodied existence, cannot know what will happen once we die and it saddens us to imagine leaving our loved ones. Yet Jewish tradition affirms that our physical demise is not the end of our consciousness, for Rabbi Yaakov teaches (*M. Avot* 4:6): "This world is a passageway before the World-to-Come. Prepare yourself in the passageway in order to enter the main room."

### We Each Have a Soul

Each of us is endowed with a *neshamah*, an intangible soul, which links us to the Divine. The Torah teaches (Genesis 2:7): "Then the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." Thus, we are both animated and made conscious by the spirit of our Creator. Upon our death, our *neshamah* returns to its source (Ecclesiastes 12:7): "For then the dust will return to the earth, and the spirit will return to God who gave it."

Judaism emphasizes this life, for the Torah teaches (Deuteronomy 30:19): "Choose life!"

As a result, many rabbis downplay or even deny Judaism's belief in an afterlife. However, our people always believed in the survival of the soul. Although the Torah hardly addresses what happens after we die, regarding six key figures, the Torah records that "he died, was gathered to his people, and was buried." Medieval and contemporary biblical scholars agree that "gathered to his people" refers to the soul, a consciousness that perseveres and receives an eternal life on another plane.

### Evidence that the Soul Survives

At first impression, we moderns are skeptical of the belief in survival of the soul because we fear it is a product of wishful thinking. We are also unsure because there are no scientific proofs for either the soul or its endurance.

Although we may lack conclusive proof, there is a vast contemporary literature that deals with near-death experiences and past-life memories. Many believe, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the teaching of the Jewish tradition is true: we are endowed with a soul that survives our physical demise.

### Scripture Describes After-Death Experience

Hebrew Scripture describes communication with the dead. When King Saul needs to speak with the deceased prophet Samuel, he goes to a medium, the Witch of Endor, who conjures up the soul of the prophet. Samuel tells the king that he and his sons will join

him the next day (I Samuel 28:3-25).

In a similar vein, the Talmud recounts that after Rabbi Nachman died, he appeared to his friend Rabbah and said, "[My death was no more painless] than removing a hair from milk. But if the Holy Blessed One were to say to me, 'Go back to the world as you were,' I would decline, for the dread [of death] is anguishing."

The Talmud relates that when people die they emerge from the physical body and undergo a life review in which they are made aware of their shortcomings and achievements. The Zohar elaborates that upon death the soul is drawn toward the *Shechinah*, God's presence, often pictured as a bright light. Deceased family members greet the soul and serve as guides toward the light. There is a multileveled process of soul purification, aided by the deeds of loved ones who are still living. According to medieval Jewish writings, the recitation of the Mourner's *Kaddish* prayer is the act that brings merit and helps elevate the soul of a loved one.

