

What Happens When We Die?  
Sermon by Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom  
Congregation Adath Jeshurun  
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"When you die, are you ever allowed to come back?" It's Linus. In the cartoon strip "Peanuts" by Charles Schultz.

Charlie Brown has the answer. "Only if you had your hand stamped."

"Rabbi, what do Jews believe about the afterlife? Do you believe in life after death?"

This question came from an intense Catholic woman who was participating in a program we used to have when I was a young rabbi in Detroit. Each year, a group of our congregants gathered with neighbors from a local Catholic church for a "Day of Understanding for Christians and Jews." Our discussions were often frank. We did not pull any punches about the things we disagreed on. And we often found areas of common concern that united us. As we shared, we grew to be trusting friends and that friendship kept us coming back year after year.

I had not been prepared for this query. I hesitated. What would I say? The Seminary never prepared me for this one. And I was so young, the afterlife was the last thing on my mind. I did not have an answer. But I had to respond. So after what seemed like a long pause, I finally said "That's a difficult question. Some Jews believe in the afterlife. Others do not. There are a wide variety of opinions expressed in the literature, but no specific dogma."

"Well," she responded very carefully and very respectfully, "If you don't believe in life after death, that the good will be rewarded in heaven and the wicked punished in hell, why be good?"

This one I felt better prepared for. "In Judaism," I said, "the most important thing

is not what happens to us after we die, but what we do while we are alive. The reason for being good is because it's the right thing to do. The Talmud teaches us that we should not serve God because we expect a reward. We should do a good deed, or fulfill a commandment, out of love for God, without expecting anything in return for our goodness."

She smiled.

I smiled.

I confess I felt a certain sense of moral superiority in my answer.

I also felt like I had dodged a bullet.

Now, I am in my 40th year in the rabbinate, and I find that I am less and less satisfied with the way I finessed that question. I am being asked about the afterlife more and more. Not by non-Jews, mind you, for whom the afterlife is a very clear dogma and principle of faith. But by Jews who want to know what our tradition teaches, and what they can believe for themselves.

I vividly recall standing at the bedside of a cherished friend moments after he had died. His wife, son, and daughter-in-law were there with me. We held hands, prayed, and stood quietly, reflecting on his life, and the long struggle of his dying.

Suddenly, his daughter-in-law turned to me, and out of the blue she asked, "Rabbi, where is he now? What happens when we die? "

In an instant, I was back in that room in Detroit. As insecure and unsure as I was then. "Oh, no," I thought to myself. "Not that question again!"

There was an interminable moment's hesitation as I tried to figure out what to say. Finally, "What do you believe?" came out of my mouth.

I thought it was a very clever answer . . . until she called me a few weeks later and

said, "Rabbi, you can't get off the hook so easily. I really want to know what Judaism says about life after death. And I really want to know what you believe."

The idea of the afterlife is a recurrent subject of speculation by theologians, and a source of urgent curiosity for individuals.

I am amazed at how often I officiate at a funeral where a family member, a child or grandchild, eulogizes a loved one, and, from those I least expect it, I hear them speak of the dead as still living. They address their loved one in their remarks, and say "I know you are listening to me." They picture how the deceased person is "watching over me" and "protecting" me. Is it just a figure of speech that makes them feel better? Or do they believe it?

There is a television show on Showtime called "Torchwood - Miracle Day." The miracle is that no one dies. No one can die. I have not seen it but I understand it is a horror story.

And this year, Paul Simon released a song called "The Afterlife." In his vision of heaven, "Buddah and Moses and all the noses from narrow to flat / Had to stand in the line, just to glimpse the divine, what do you think about that? / You got to fill out a form first, and then you wait in the line."

Sounds like a day at the DMV.

Earlier this year I attended a seminar sponsored by the Rabbinical Assembly in Philadelphia. The presenter was Dr. Simcha Raphael who is the author of a thick, dense volume of sources, titled *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*.

I went to the meeting out of curiosity, ready to scoff at whatever he was going to tell me. I came away, profoundly moved by his insights, and by the seriousness of the topic.

So right then and there I decided that on this Yom Kippur I would speak about

Jewish views of the afterlife, and try to formulate my own notion with you.

And I would invite Rabbi Raphael to offer a seminar to our congregants on the topic. That will be in December, three Sunday mornings, “Jewish Afterlife Traditions -- Ancestors and Ghosts, Angels, Spirit Guides and Reincarnating Souls.” Sort of “Everything You Wanted to Know About What Jews Believe About the Afterlife . . . But Were Afraid to Ask.”

This morning I will not give you all the answers. Because I do not have them. But perhaps I will stimulate you to ask some questions, and want to attend Rabbi Raphael’s workshops.

So, what does Judaism teach about life after death?

And what do I believe?

### *A Metaphoric Immortality*

I know many people understand the afterlife metaphorically. For them, we live on through our children. And through our deeds -- our accomplishments and our good name.

I can understand the appeal of this approach to the afterlife. It is a this-worldly answer to an other worldly question. We don’t risk seeming like kooks when we talk about it. But I don’t find it very helpful or satisfying.

Here’s why.

Where does it leave people who have no children? Have they no chance at immortality? More important, though, children have their own lives to lead. They cannot live ours. If we expect them to be our monuments, we place a terrible burden on them, an unrealistic and unreasonable burden.

As for our deeds and accomplishments, how many are remembered for very long after we die? Life goes on with barely a lost beat even when the greatest of us dies. Another comes to take our place, do our job, make his or her own reputation.

In High School, most of us read Shelley's great poem "Ozymandias", and ode to a self proclaimed King of Kings, whose eternal monument lies in the sand, a "colossal wreck."

The sands of time quickly bury our pretensions to eternity on earth.

Roger Cohen, in an article written in 1991, refers to the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center as "a supreme example self-glorifying monumentalism . . . on the part of unaccountable, autonomous public authorities."

We all know how that turned out.

### *Living Forever by Not Dying*

Woody Allen wrote "I don't want to live forever through my work. I want to live forever by not dying."

We want to live forever by not dying. But the body wears out. We stop breathing. Our heart stops beating. And to the grave or funeral pyre we go.

Of course some go to the freezer. Robert Ettinger died this year. He was the founder of cryonics. That is the science, or the hope, I should say, that one day medicine will find ways to cure all ills. At that time, those who had the foresight to have their remains flash-frozen upon death will be thawed, restored to life, and healed. Sounds far-fetched, but if you have the bucks, isn't it worth a try? And if it doesn't work, you'll never know anyway!

But for most of us, our hope is that somehow life goes on in another dimension of existence. Or in another time. And those are the directions in which Judaism, and most

religions, pursue the hope of immortality. We look for life to go on as pure spirit. Without physical form. Or we look for it to be reinstated. Later. In the future. Not by cryonics, but by divine intervention.

In fact, it is this future reinstatement of life as we know it, the doctrine of *tehiyat hamaytim*, the resurrection of the dead, that is the most ancient and authentic articulation of the Jewish conception of life after death. It is the belief that at some future time, God will return all who have died to life. At that time we will physically walk the earth again. Some of the rabbis of the Talmud asserted that when the dead do return to life, it will be in perfect physical condition, illnesses cured, blemishes repaired, and fully clothed!

I wonder at what age we will return. At the age we die? In our prime? Or do we get to choose? Will those who died as babies come back as infants? Will they grow up, or be a baby forever? Maybe they will return as they would have been had they lived to maturity. Will we be contemporaries to our parents and children, all the same age? Will we all wear clothes of one period (and if so which one?) or will we gawk at each other's period costume? Somehow I cannot imagine Abraham or Moses in a three piece suit, or Sarah in stilettos. Cleopatra, maybe. But not Sarah. And won't the earth be impossibly crowded?

These problems aside, this doctrine was so important that the Mishnah declares that while every Israelite has a share in the world to come, those who deny that the doctrine of resurrection is grounded in the Torah itself will forfeit their right to future eternal life. It is not only if one denies resurrection that one loses his right to it, even if one says it is not derived from the Torah! And it is not clear that the Torah had any view at all about the afterlife.

One of my dear colleagues and teachers, Rabbi Herschel Matt, of blessed memory, related to me how he had a complete faith in physical resurrection. I was incredulous. I do not know anyone else who has affirmed that belief with such fervor. Herschel even published an article on the subject. To him, resurrection made perfect sense. First, it is what we pray for daily. Second, it affirms that the human being is a unitary entity, body and soul combined. It makes no sense to separate us. What would a soul be without a body?

When would resurrection take place? Herschel explained that from the perspective of time, it will be at the end of days, with the coming of the Messiah. But from the perspective of the individual, it will be the very next moment, when he wakes from the death-sleep. Just as we awake from anesthesia and it seems as no time has intervened, so will it seem to us when the great resurrection takes place.

Still, for most of us, this conception seems naive. We regard it as a scientific and logical impossibility. It subjects eternity to the bounds of physical reality.

That is why belief in the eternity of the soul apart from the body gained much greater currency in Jewish thought.

Maimonides is among the first to suggest that “eternal life” is referring to a world of the spirit. In the world to come, he said, the righteous are without body or bodily form. "The souls of the righteous ones exist like the heavenly angels."

This was a controversial doctrine when Maimonides expressed it. He was denounced as a heretic for denying physical resurrection in the world to come. And though he publicly recanted, one suspects that he never gave up on the idea of a spiritual rather than physical eternity.

A good deal of Jewish eschatological thought is occupied by an attempt to harmonize these two ideas that are so different, the resurrection of the person in bodily form, and the eternity of the ethereal soul. The notion of the purity of the soul and the impurity of the body have led many to embrace the idea of the eternity of the soul over bodily resurrection. In the world to come, why would God want to give us back a body the pleasuring of which is the cause of so much human impurity, sin and conflict? And if the body is so purified that it has no natural drives left, what function does it serve?

The mystics, the Kabbalists, had a different approach. In their view, the human soul is a by-product of the original divine emanation, the shivrat ha-kaylim, the breaking of the vessels that contained the divine energy. It is a part of the Divine, seeking to be reunited with the totality of Divinity.

In their view, each soul is implanted in a body with a specific task to fulfill. When it is completed, it will be reunited with the Divine Whole in a series of stages. Until its mission is fulfilled, it is forced to transmigrate from body to body, even into non-human entities (a process called gilgul, rolling) until it is ready to begin its ascent to God for ultimate purification and restoration.

So, when we consider Jewish approaches to faith in the afterlife, these are our main options. . . . metaphor, bodily resurrection, the eternity of the soul, and transmigration.

How do we choose among them?

This, of course is the hard part. What do we believe? Do we believe any of it? Certainly, there is something in the human soul that wants to believe it. In Seder Avodah, Rabbi Max D. Klein expresses this when he says "Life cries out that what is essentially the human being is not meant to die." And James Martineau wrote that "We do not believe in immortality because we have proved it, but we try forever to prove it because we believe it." We want to believe it. But we are modern people, scientific people. Can we really believe such a primitive, self-centered notion?

Do I believe it? Can I believe it?

### *Immortality as an Answer to a Question*

I was speaking with a colleague recently. I was surprised when he said to me with absolute conviction, "Seymour, when I die I have no doubt that my soul will live on. My consciousness will not end. I will be with God, and with my parents and brothers who have already died."

I confess that I do not have that faith. But neither do I scoff at it. I am still searching. What is it I am looking for?

What is the question that immortality is the answer to? Perhaps if we understand the question, we can find our answer more easily.

In the Tziduk HaDin - Resignation, Submission to God's Will -

אדם, אם בן שנה יהיה, או אלף שנים חיה, מה יתרון לו? כלא היה יהיה.

Death is the ultimate negation of our existence. It wipes us out. Rabbi David Wolpe says "Death is the thief of meaning."

I believe that the question all notions of the afterlife are trying to answer is this: "Does my life have any meaning?" What we are all searching for is some reassurance that our lives are not in vain. We are looking for something that gives us strength to endure its pain and disappointments, and, ultimately, the courage to let it go without regret.

We all ask the same questions as the author of the book of Ecclesiastes. Human and beast alike will die, he muses. So what superiority is there to the human? Rich rather than poor? Wise rather than foolish? Good rather than wicked? What ultimate difference does any of it make?

For some, this world is enough. In their view, ultimate questions are of no meaning outside of a this-worldly framework. Focus on this world. Do the best you can. Find your reward here and now. Enjoy your riches. Explore the treasures of the intellect fully. Do the right thing. Find satisfaction in the life that is yours to lead. That's all there is.

For others, it's not enough. We are compelled by our faith in God to understand the meaning of our existence beyond this physical world that we inhabit but for a fleeting moment. What meaning does my life have from the aspect of eternity? This is the insistent, demanding question that gnaws at us.

Does my suffering or pain have any meaning? Do my joys give me alone pleasure? What happens to me when I die? How can the world just go on without me, without missing me? As if I were never here?

## *What Do I Believe?*

So what do I believe? Do I have an answer?

In the Talmud, Rabban Yohanan interprets a verse in Isaiah as referring to the world to come. "No eye has seen it, except yours, God." Maybe I should just leave this one alone. We have no way of knowing. So many of the depictions seem . . . well, preposterous. Why not leave it an open question? A big maybe.

The older I get, the more restless I am with evasive answers, responding to a question with another question to buy time.

It is not just as a rabbi who needs an answer for his congregants as they face the void, the abyss of the unknown. It is for me. I need an answer that will quiet my anxiety about the future, about a world which will go on without me. Will it matter that I lived?

I must confess, that despite my need, and my striving, I have no clear answer that satisfies me. I do not like any of the alternatives. No matter which one I choose, they all seem to be self-centered conceit. Unconvincing and unsatisfying.

Rabbi Bradley Artsen, Dean of the Ziegler Rabbinical School of the American Jewish University in California published an article earlier this year in which he proposes a novel solution.

He argues that the whole debate is based on a false premise. "We think of ourselves as substances, but we are really organized patterns of energy. Everything is in flux, everything is dynamic." In other words, while we perceive our existence as a differentiated, discrete being, separate from everything else in the universe, we are really just part of a massive energy field. He says, "We are not substances now, and we will not be substances when life ends."

What are we, then? We are part of God's eternity now, and we will "remain eternally alive in God's memory, God's thought."

## *The Divine Whole*

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner says that everything exists "in God." The universe is one.

Each of us is a different part of this universal, Divine organism. Like cells in the body, we change, we mutate, we die, we come into being.

Some cells are hardy and last a long time. Others are weaker and last a shorter period. Some do their job admirably and nourish other cells. Others are ill or defective and cannot function properly. Every cell is necessary. Otherwise, why would they be created?

Similarly with human beings. What diversity there is among us. Some live for decades, and others for but a moment within their mother's womb. Some are creative and their accomplishments will endure the test of time, and others will be remembered only by the people who loved them.

Each of us is precious, unique, necessary. Otherwise, why would we be here? The Mishnah says, as I taught on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, Each one of us must say, "The world was created for me." I do not know if I will have any residual independent identity in another dimension, but I know that my life will not have been in vain if I play my essential role. Whether I live long or short, whether I was virtuous or flawed, whether I was talented or not, whether I leave children or not -- I had my role to play. I played it. No one else could have done it. And once it was done, my energy will be redistributed in some form throughout the divine system.

No soul is ever lost. The Psalmist says, God does not allow his precious ones to be obliterated. God loves, and remembers, each one of us. God is the ultimate guarantee of my eternity.

*Doing My Part. Joyfully.*

So what is my job here on earth? It is to discover what my unique role is, what it is that God needs me to do to nurture the divine organism, something that no one else can do. Not what do I want to do, but what is it that God wants me to do.

A number of years ago, I spent some time at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Massachusetts. Wandering the halls during a break, I found the following quote tacked to a door: "It is better to follow your own life's mission, however imperfectly, than to assume the life mission of another person, however successfully." (Attributed to Bhagavad Gita.)

In a similar vein, Steve Jobs, in his famous Stanford speech, said "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life."

This afternoon we will read the book of Jonah, the prophet. Jonah didn't like the role God had for him. He tried to run away from it. He refused to accept it. Look what happened to him. In the end, he had to do it anyway, but got no joy from it, and he failed to appreciate what a marvelous deed he had done in rescuing a city from sin and destruction.

Almost a year ago I was driving somewhere and listening to NPR. I happened to hear a brief segment in which Human Rights Lawyer Arsalan Iftikhar, a regular NPR contributor, was interviewing his father, Dr. Tariq Iftikhar. Dr. Iftikhar is an orthopaedic surgeon in Chicago.

Dr. Iftikhar had a profound influence on his son in the 90's when he performed many pro bono surgeries on Bosnians who had been helped to flee the genocide in their country. In 2005 Dr. Iftikhar went on a Doctors without Borders mission to help in the aftermath of a massive earthquake in Southeast Asia.

So now the son says he wants to ask his father a question. You know, Dad, because of my work I have had many threats against my life. "What's it like for you to see your son going through that?"

Dr. Iftikhar responded. "As a parent, your mother and I are always concerned about your well-being. But this life is not forever. . . If God takes your life doing this positive work, this is destiny. I hope it does not happen in front of us, but history will tell that at least when you left this world, there was some positive impact."

Isn't that what we all want? To leave this world, having had a positive impact while we are here.

### *Doing Our Part*

There is a famous lesson taught by the Hasidic rebbe, Zusia of Hanipol. Zusia used to say, "When I die and go on high, God will not judge me by asking 'Why were you not Abraham?' or 'Why were you not Moses?' God will ask me 'Zusia, why were you not Zusia?'"

We do not have to die for God to ask us that question. It is addressed to us daily as we frantically strive to make something of our lives. "Seymour," he says, "why are you not Seymour? Why are you trying to be someone or something else? Find your role, play it the best you can. Play it willingly. Joyfully. That's what I need. That's what I expect."

I believe we achieve our immortality when we discover what role God has assigned to us, the one only we can do to advance the health of the universal organism which exists within the divine.

In Pirkey Avot, Ben Zoma asks "Who is rich?"

It is one of those trick questions. You know the answer will not be Bill Gates or Warren Buffet.

No. Ben Zoma's answer is that a person is rich "who is fulfilled doing his part."

When we do our part, when we find what we are supposed to be doing with our

lives, what purpose we have in advancing God's plan, making the world a better place, what we can do that no one else can, we will also find happiness, contentment and fulfillment.

And then, we will find that any concept of immortality, or none at all, will slake the thirst we have for understanding, and fortify us with the courage to face life. Which we did not choose. And death. Which we cannot escape.