

Review of

Jewish Views of the Afterlife, second edition. Simcha Paull Raphael, forward by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.

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Since its first publication in 1994, I have recommended this book to many students and congregants, who were often surprised to learn that there *are* Jewish views of the afterlife. Generations of North American rabbis have a lot to answer for; their exaggerated emphasis on Judaism as a this-worldly religion left many Jews in complete ignorance of beliefs in which their ancestors were immersed.

As the author's preface to this second edition notes, this ignorance has lessened, thanks in part to *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* itself. Yet, an educational project for general audiences like the website "Judaism 101" still finds it necessary to state that "contrary to popular belief, Judaism does believe in an afterlife".

In this context, Raphael's wide-ranging, passionate, clearly written, and thoroughly researched book aspires to two somewhat incompatible goals. The first is to provide a historical survey of Jewish teachings about life after death, showing their richness and diversity. The second goal is to encourage Jews today to embrace afterlife beliefs rooted in Jewish sources, and to put these beliefs into practice in care of the dying, funeral rituals, and mourning customs.

The book begins with a personal and poetic foreword by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. This is followed by the author's brief prefaces; the preface to the new edition considers recent changes in popular attitudes toward death and afterlife, understandably ignoring skeptical trends like the "New Atheism" and focusing on developments compatible with the book's own interests. A more detailed introduction is provided by chapters 1 and 2, which sketch the personal and cultural background for Raphael's work and set forth the plan of the book as "a study of Jewish texts... a survey of ideas of life after death throughout the history of Judaism" (p. 3).

This plan is beautifully carried out in chapters 3 through 9, which combine surveys of ideas from different periods with generous selections from primary sources, in readable translations. These chapters focus in turn on the Hebrew Bible, Apocryphal literature, Talmud and Midrash, medieval legendary literature, medieval philosophy, Kabbalah, and Hasidic stories.

This is a somewhat idiosyncratic selection which leaves out, for example, the many stories of ghosts and communication with the dead found in *Sefer Hasidim*, from medieval Germany, or in modern Sephardi/Mizrahi folklore. Nevertheless, this is the best available sourcebook on Jewish views of the afterlife, sampling and summarizing a broad, vivid and varied range of teachings, often wildly incompatible with one another. Biblical notions of a shadowy underworld rub shoulders with abstract spiritual notions of the soul's immortality, elaborate systems of reincarnation, and a medieval vision of the post

mortem punishment of “the wicked... half in fire and half in snow, with worms crawling up and down their bodies” (p. 215).

Each chapter concludes with a point-by-point summary which provides additional clarity and attempts to trace, among all the contradictions and in the absence of crystallized dogma, a development of ideas from one period to the next. For example, “Nahmanides’ writings reflect an emerging psychological orientation... Increasingly, the experience of life after death comes to be seen as a state of consciousness” (p. 271).

As, implicitly, the next step in this ongoing development, chapter 10 proposes “a contemporary psychological model of the afterlife”. Here Raphael follows in the footsteps of Nahmanides and others who creatively and selectively synthesized afterlife traditions into a consistent picture, each in his own way. Unlike these illustrious predecessors, however, Raphael acknowledges his creativity and selectiveness, and his use of non-Jewish sources (from Tibetan Buddhism in particular) alongside Jewish ones. New in this edition, chapter 11 addresses “the renewal of Jewish death rituals” from “a soul-guiding perspective” and includes liturgical texts and suggestions for funeral practice.

These two chapters aim for the second goal mentioned above: encouraging Jewish readers to embrace belief in the afterlife and put it into practice. As such, they are, essentially, based on an appeal to the authority of tradition—the traditions explored in chapters 3-9. The historical approach taken by those chapters, however, leaves us with a picture of constantly changing ideas, often contradicting each other. Raphael the spiritual

teacher, affirming the wisdom of the tradition, is undermined by Raphael the historian, who has exposed the tradition as fallible and inconsistent.

Nevertheless, for those already inclined to believe that individual life does not end with death, chapters 10-11 are valuable resources for thinking about immortality in a contemporary Jewish way, and for the conscious revival of traditional practices of attending to the dying, preparing for death, and caring for the dead and those left behind.

For many readers, then, this important work of scholarship may also be a spiritual resource. For all readers, it is an outstanding example of Jewish religious creativity today as well as a window into a neglected and surprisingly rich theme in Jewish religious texts.