

The Soul and the Afterlife

A person is walking away from the viewer on a wooden bridge that stretches into the distance. The bridge has white railings and is set against a dramatic sky with purple and blue clouds. At the end of the bridge, a bright, glowing light emanates from a large opening in the clouds, creating a silhouette of the person walking towards it. The overall mood is spiritual and hopeful.

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1

JOURNEY TO THE NEXT WORLD

By Lori Palatnik

What happens when you die? How does the life you lead in this world affect your experience of the next world?

Are you a body, or a body and a soul? Most people would answer, “I’m a body and a soul.” But do we mean it? Do we live our lives and make decisions as if each of us is not just a body, but a body and a soul?

At certain times in our lives we reconnect with our souls. A wedding is a soul experience for the bride and groom, a new beginning through the spiritual union under the *chuppah*, the wedding canopy.

For many, going to Israel is a life-altering experience of connecting with the land, the people, and the legacy that is part of every Jew.

The birth of a child is a soul-stirring moment. We witness the miracle of creation, the wonder of a new life, and we feel the awesome responsibility of this priceless gift to guide through life.

On a journey to the countryside as we look up to a star-filled sky, we can truly see forever. A feeling of transcendence overtakes us.

A near-death experience can be a dramatic soul encounter. People do not recover from such experiences without realizing that they have been given another chance. Afterward, each new day holds new meaning, and even casual relationships turn precious.

Death itself puts us in touch with our souls. No one stands at a funeral and thinks about the menu for dinner that night. Everyone thinks, “What is life all about, anyway?” “What am I living for?” “Is there something beyond this world?”

We know that we are souls. When we look into the eyes of someone we love, we do not see random molecules thrown to-

gether. We love the essence of that person, and that essence is what we call a *neshama*, a soul.

God formed man out of dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils a breath (soul) of life. (Genesis 2:7)

The soul is eternal, although the body's existence is temporary. When God decides a person's time on this earth has ended, He takes back the soul, and the body goes back to the earth, completing the cycle of creation ("dust to dust"). For, in the beginning, the first person, Adam, was created from the dust of the ground.

The essence of our loved ones, the goodness and special qualities that they possessed, the part of them that made noble choices in life, performed good deeds, and touched the lives of others – their *neshama* – goes on to a world of infinite pleasure. In that world, physical sufferings do not exist, and souls bask in the light of their Creator, enjoying the rewards for all that they did here on earth.

Front-Row Seats

But what kinds of choices and deeds count? Those of people who saved the lives of others, who led armies to victory, who discovered medical cures? Yes, those people enjoy a place in the World to Come, but so do those who led simpler lives, who performed quiet acts of kindness and made a difference to those around them. Perhaps what they did wasn't front-page news, but small acts have merit too and can mean an eternity of the deepest pleasures in the World to Come.

What we are experiencing now is called *Olam Hazei* ("This

World”), while the next world is referred to as *Olam Haba* (“The World to Come”). We are all familiar with what happens here, but what goes on in *Olam Haba*?

Of course no one in Jewish history ever died and came back to tell us what happens in the world beyond. Yet we are assured there is another existence. Maimonides, the 12th century scholar, includes this belief in his “Thirteen Principles of Faith.” Our oral tradition speaks about it at length, and Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, is also replete with wisdom about the hereafter

Olam Haba, Heaven, is more easily understood when compared to a theater. Our Sages state that every Jew has a portion in the World to Come. This means that a seat in the theater has been reserved for each person’s soul. But as in any theater, some seats are better than others. If God is “center stage,” some souls will enjoy seats in the front row center section, others will sit in the balcony, and some will have obstructed views. But everyone will have a place. What seats we are assigned are based on the choices we make and the deeds that we do in *Olam Haze*, this world.

We are told that we will be surprised who gets the best seats. We will look down and say, “What are they doing there? They weren’t so great!” “What are they doing up front? They didn’t accomplish very much!”

And God will answer and say, “They are there because they listened to My voice.”

We make a mistake when we think that only those who seem great, honored and accomplished will merit a place before God. Each person is judged individually, and we don’t know what one mitzvah, one act of kindness, will make the difference when God

reviews a person's life.

Listening to God does not only mean obeying the laws of what and what not to do. Hearing His voice means that we see that life isn't ruled by coincidence, that we realize that events take place for a reason, and we act accordingly. We may not know the Torah backward or forward, but if we have a relationship with our Creator, it can be worth a front row seat in eternity.

Eternal Pleasure

Our Sages say that if we took all of our life's pleasures, every one of them, and all the pleasures of everyone in this world, and brought them all together, the total wouldn't be worth even one second in the World to Come, the pleasure of being close to God.

Now, it may not have been uppermost on our minds in this world, but we know that if you were called to someone's home for a meeting, and following the meeting the host announced that God's Presence was about to arrive and wanted to communicate with you, you wouldn't say, "Well, sorry, it's getting late and I have to get up early tomorrow." You would be scared out of your mind, but there is nothing more important or more desirable than going before God, Creator of heaven and earth.

We can't imagine passive pleasure. For us pleasure is active. We go away on vacation. We ask for a raise and get it. We eat a big helping of the flavor of the month. Something happens and we feel pleasure. So how can sitting in one place be so overwhelmingly pleasurable? Because it is an earned pleasure – what we did in our lifetime on earth has yielded this result.

In *Olam Haba* we are sitting before God, Who created us. He

knows us inside and out. Every moment here on earth is His gift to us. He loves us more than our parents love us, more than we ever love or ever will love our children. And He calls us back to Him.

Of course people are not perfect and we all make mistakes, but those errors in judgment do not erase our good deeds. If we light candles on Friday night and then go to a movie, God does not look down and say, “Candles. Movie. We’re back to square one.” The act of lighting candles, the bringing in of the Sabbath, is eternal. Nothing can take it away. It is the same with every positive effort we make in life.

Of course we all make bad decisions sometimes, and some acts we deeply regret. What should we do about them? Ideally, we should take care of our mistakes here in this life. If we have wronged someone, we should make peace. If we are letting bad habits or character hold us back, we should work on breaking free and return to being the person we know we can be.

Judgment Day

When our souls leave this world and go before God, we give an accounting, and a certain judgment takes place. Judgment is not something we look forward to. Who wants to be judged? But this is not just any judge. This is God, our Father in Heaven. A human judge might be biased. But this is our Creator, who gave us life and everything that happens in our lives. His judgment of us comes from love, and anything that derives from love is for our good.

The decisions that we make count for something – not just at

the moment, but forever.

Furthermore, His judgment means *that our judgments count*. Life is not random; it has meaning and purpose. The decisions that we make in our lives count for something, and not just at the moment, but forever. The ultimate reward and punishment happen, but only in Olam Haba, the next world, not here in *Olam Haze*, this world.

Each year on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, God judges us. He looks at the deeds and choices that we made during the year and decides what our next year will be like – based on our efforts to correct our mistakes and the decisions that we made in our lives. But at the time of death, after the burial, we go before God Who will judge us not just on one year, but on our entire lives.

Highway to Hell

The soul can go to one of two places: Heaven, which we have discussed, or *Gehenom*, Hell.

We believe in Hell? It may be surprising, perhaps, but yes, we do. Why is it a surprise? Often it is a subject not brought up in Hebrew school or in the synagogues. But also the reality is that we grow up in a Christian world, where as youngsters we understand that anything Christian is not ours. And therefore, if Christians believe in Heaven and Hell, then I guess we don't.

But we do. Yet the Jewish understanding of Heaven and Hell differs from what we may hear from other religions.

Hell is a place God created to help us take care of the mistakes we didn't correct in this world. It is called *Gehenom*. But don't be afraid. It's not a place of devils and pitchforks, and it's not forever.

If it is God's judgment that a person has to enter *Gehenom*, the maximum amount of time spent there would be one Jewish year. A person can be there a split second, an entire Jewish year, or somewhere in between. That is the reason that we say Kaddish, the mourner's prayer, for 11 months. We assume that our loved ones would never be there an entire year. Ideally, we want to bypass it altogether.

A great rabbi was scheduled to speak on the subject of the next world at an "Executive Lunch and Learn" series in downtown Toronto. My husband picked him up at the airport, and on the way downtown asked him to "go easy on *Gehenom*" with the primarily non-religious audience. He was afraid the rabbi would scare them.

The rabbi turned to my husband and asked, "Do you have hospitals here in Toronto?"

"Yes," he answered, confused.

"And," continued the rabbi, "are these world class hospitals?"

"Yes," answered my husband again.

"Would you ever want to check into these hospitals?"

"No," said my husband.

"But if you need to, aren't you glad they're there?"

The rabbi explained that *Gehenom* is a hospital for the soul. Going there will be painful. But it's from God's kindness, His mercy, and His love that such a place exists. We wouldn't want to check in even for a minute, but if we have to, we know it's for our good, and we hope our stay will be as short as possible.

The way to avoid *Gehenom* altogether is to take care of our mistakes here. This is not an easy task, but making the supreme

effort in this world will ultimately avoid a much greater pain in the next.

Of Blessed Memory

Whether we are able to by-pass it, or we have to spend some time in *Gehenom*, eventually we are able to enter the theater of *Olam Haba*. If we arrive and each of us is assigned a seat, does that mean we are there for eternity and that our share of pleasure is limited to our particular view? No. The people we have left on earth can increase our share in the World to Come, and enable us to earn better seating.

How does this happen? In memory of loved ones people often give charity, name babies, learn Torah in their merit, and so on. These are not just good deeds. These are acts we do in this world that have everlasting spiritual ramifications.

When we do something in someone's memory, we are saying: *Because of this person that I loved, I am living my life differently. He may be gone, but he is not forgotten. He continues to be a source of inspiration in my life. His life mattered, and his legacy will continue to make a difference.*

What should you do in memory of a loved one?

My husband tells people to take a 30-day period, ideally the first 30 days after the funeral, which is called the *shloshim*, and do something concrete in memory of the departed. For some it could be placing a coin in a tzedakah (charity) box each day and reciting a simple prayer.

Most people, after experiencing such a tremendous loss, feel a great need to do something to honor the departed. Because of

the concept of *Olam Haba*, doing something will not only bring you comfort, but also add to the merit of the one that you have lost.

Souls in the next world have awareness. They know what goes on here. By choosing to honor them, you are making an impact far greater than you will ever know.

2

LIFE AFTER DEATH

By Rabbi Benjamin Blech

*What matters most is maximizing
our life before death.*

There's been a spate of new books presenting what the authors consider an unshakable case for the survival of consciousness beyond death, drawn from quantum mechanics, neuroscience and moral philosophy.

But I have to confess that having the inside information Judaism gave me – long before the publication of these new findings that claim to know what happens after our “full life of 120” – is far more satisfying than the most compelling and supposedly scientific validity for belief in an afterlife.

True, Jewish tradition never emphasized or even went into great detail about the specifics of the World to Come. It was simply a given, a fact rooted, as biblical commentators explained, in the notion that we are created “in the image of God.” Since God is eternal, there is something within every one of us – the Divine essence that represents our identity and that we refer to as our souls – that must of necessity be equally eternal and immortal.

Our bodies, as material creations, came from the dust of the earth and have to return to their source; they disintegrate when they are buried. But our souls are the gift of “Himself” that the Almighty breathed into us. They accompany us in our journey through life and do not forsake us with the end of our physical beings.

Judaism did not dwell on the obvious. Sure there is life after death; without it life would be rendered a transient flash in the pan, perhaps fun while it lasted but ultimately devoid of meaning. The Torah recorded the past as history; it chose to leave the future as mystery. Its purpose was primarily to be a “tree of life” concerned with teaching us how to improve ourselves and

our world while we inhabit it. The details of our post-terrestrial existence were in the main left unrecorded. There will be time enough for us to discover the Divine master plan for the World to Come – once we get there.

But if we are to lead our lives with the proper sense of responsibility and purpose, there are some things that the Sages realized we have to know about. So they did give us a peek into the future after our deaths.

At the moment of death, we catch a glimpse of God. The Torah teaches us that God decreed, “No man can see me and live” (Exodus 33:20). The implication is clear: with the end of life we are granted the gift of a minute vision of the Almighty. That is the reason, many commentators suggest, that we are obligated to close the eyes of the deceased. The eyes that have now beheld God Himself must be shut off from any further contact with the profane.

And it is this momentary meeting that serves to give meaning to all of our lives. We suddenly grasp that everything we have ever done or said was in the presence of a Higher Power. Everything we accomplished or failed to do was judged by the One Who created us. “Know before whom you are destined to give a final accounting” is the language of the Talmud. Can there be a greater incentive to do good and not evil than the knowledge that in the end it is God Who will pass judgment on whether we were a success or a failure?

In Kabbalah, the mystics add a small piece to the story. It is not only God who judges us. As we bid farewell to the world, we are shown a film that contains scenes of our entire lives. We

are witnesses to every moment of our days on Earth as they pass before us with incredible rapidity. And as we watch our own story unfold, there are times when we cringe with embarrassment; others when we smile with glee. Our past moral lapses cause us to shudder in pain; our victories over our evil inclinations provide us with a keen sense of spiritual triumph. It is then that we realize in retrospect that we alone are the greatest judges of our own lives. What happens after death is that we gain the wisdom to evaluate our own life by the standards of Heaven – because we have finally glimpsed an eternal perspective.

The Eternal, Here and Now

There is a synagogue in Jerusalem with a most unusual architectural feature. Built into one of the walls facing the congregants is a coffin. When I visited and remarked upon this seemingly morbid addition, one of the elders explained to me that this was a tradition their community maintained for many centuries. It had its roots in an effort to remind everyone of the cardinal truth that, being mortal, we are all destined someday to face our Maker. No one is exempt from the final judgment. To place this in the forefront of our consciousness every day, he smilingly said to me, is not morbid but surely a mitzvah.

No, we do not need to know the details of the World to Come. But we must constantly be aware of the reality that our days will be scrutinized by a Higher Authority – and that we ourselves will be forced to join in the Divine judgment.

There is no clear picture painted for us of Heaven and Hell. While belief in reward and punishment after death is, according

to Maimonides, one of the 13 major principles of our faith, we have no way of knowing exactly what is meant by this concept. But we can hazard a guess. Since our entry into the next world is preceded by the obligation for every one of us to watch the film record of our lives, what greater Hell can there be than for us to have to acknowledge our shameful actions and our unconscionable failings unto all eternity? And what greater Heaven can there be than the ability to look back forever on personal acts of goodness, of charity, and of noble and pious behavior that made us find favor in the eyes of God?

That's why it's so important for us to affirm that death isn't the end. And even if we don't know exactly how our souls will be treated either above or below, we have been assured that the righteous are guaranteed rewards commensurate with their good deeds, and the wicked will rue the evil they perpetrated.

What is Hell? Remember when you were in eighth grade and something utterly embarrassing happened? The shame you felt and how you just wanted the ground to open up so you could disappear. That is Hell. It is the deepest realization that our life (or part of it) has been squandered, which creates a deep regret and shame in our soul.

The good news is that God – in His infinite kindness – established this as a cleansing process, where after one year (or less), all the negativity has been forever washed away.

Closing the Curtain

So why think about what happens after death while we're still here? The answer is simple and at the same time most profound:

Whatever actions we take on Earth must be with a sense of their eternal ramification.

Perhaps it's best reflected in the following story. A very wealthy man not known for his piety stood in a long line of those waiting to have their lives assessed by the heavenly court. He listened attentively as those who were being judged before him recounted both their spiritual failings and achievements. A number of them seemed to have the scales weighted against them until they suddenly remembered acts of charity they had performed, which dramatically tipped the scales in their favor. The rich man took it all in and smiled to himself.

When it was his turn, he confidently said, "I may have committed many sins during my lifetime, but I realize now what has the power to override them. I am a very wealthy man and I will be happy to write out a very large check to whatever charity you recommend."

To which the court replied, "We are truly sorry, but here we do not accept checks – only receipts."

The choices we make today create our eternal portion in the Next World.

The true tragedy of death is that it represents the closing curtain on our ability to do anymore mitzvot. We no longer have the free will to do good (or evil). It is only what we bring to that moment that can earn us entry into a state of eternal bliss. It's what we do here and now that truly matters. The choices we make today create our portion in the Next World. For eternity.

Death isn't a destroyer; it's a transition. As the chassidic Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk put it, "Death is just a matter of going from one

room to another. And if we live our lives in accord with the will of God, we are certain that the place we are going to is ultimately the more beautiful area.”

Yes, there is life after death. But the greatest afterlife is achieved by focusing on how we can maximize our life *before* death.

3

CREMATION OR BURIAL? A JEWISH VIEW

By Doron Kornbluth

*Why Jewish burial is important — for you
and the soul of the departed.*

Throughout history, societies have adopted varying approaches to dealing with corpses. Some have buried them in the ground and some have cremated them. Others sealed them away in elaborate mausoleums with food and drink, mummified them, left them for the vultures, cannibalized them and done the unthinkable to the bodies of their loved ones. Presumably, most people simply followed their neighbors' example in deciding what method to choose.

Since the very beginning of the Jewish people thousands of years ago, although many options were available, Jews have always insisted on burial.

Until recently.

Today, mirroring the developments in Western society, at least 30 percent of Jewish deaths in North America and Europe are followed by cremations, and the percentage is on the rise.

What is the cause of cremation's increasing popularity? Here are some of the top reasons:

1. Environmental concerns: Burial seems to waste land and pollute the environment.
2. Mobility concerns: Kids don't live close anyway. Why feel guilty about not visiting the gravesite?
3. Discomfort with decomposition: Cremation seems quicker and cleaner.
4. Financial concerns: Cremation seems — and often is — cheaper than burial.

As Professor Stephen Prothero put it, “whether to bury or to burn is ... no trivial matter. It touches on issues as important as perceptions of the self, attitudes toward the body, views of histo-

ry, styles of ritual, and beliefs in God and the afterlife.”¹

Because this decision is so important, it is crucial not to leave it until the rushed and stressful times of ultimate grief. Let’s examine the facts.

Environmentalists Are Not in Favor of Cremation.

Why? Simply because, contrary to common perception, cremation is bad for the environment.

Cremation uses a tremendous amount of fossil fuels — over one million Btu’s (British thermal units) per hour with an average cremation lasting between one and a half and two hours, sometimes more – a tremendous amount of energy at a time when, finally, society is realizing it needs to *lower* the use of fossil fuels.

Furthermore, cremation released toxic chemicals into the air. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency estimated in 2001 that cremations accounted for 32 percent of mercury emissions to the atmosphere in that country and a recent Canadian Study found the problem so serious that it recommended simply that “A crematorium should not be sited close to a neighborhood.”² Finally, there is plenty of land available for burial: When you crunch the numbers, burials in the U.S. use far less land per year than the construction of new Walmarts (187,000 square feet per Supercenter, excluding their massive parking lots). Even if *all* Americans were buried, it would take over 10,000 years to use up just 1% of America’s land mass. And, of course, Jews constitute less than 2% of the dead, and few cemeteries would last that long anyway.

So where does this misconception come from? Environmen-

talists *are* critical of embalming chemicals and metal caskets. They recommend what are called ‘green burials’ without the metal caskets or embalming – and openly admire the Jewish tradition which prohibits both. Environmentalists are against cremation.³

Cremation Does Not Solve Mobility Concerns

Modern mobility certainly makes cemetery visitation much harder. However, upon further reflection, things aren’t so simple. First of all, it is hard to find an appropriate place for cremated remains. Feels strange to have them in the house. Even when the children *do* find an appropriate place for the remains of their deceased parents, how long will they keep them for?

Until they switch jobs and move? Until they retire? What will they do with them then? And when, in ten or twenty years, they are no longer living independently, will their children want the remains? Will they take them? What will *they* do with the remains?

The point is that our homes and families are simply not designed for long term storage of cremated remains. At some point, they are likely to be placed in an inappropriate place, forgotten, or ignored. In *all* cases, the home option is only temporary anyway. Some choose scattering, however in many families, a child or grandchild will eventually develop a desire to visit the gravesite and re-connect with their loved ones who have passed on. Whether important to you or not, or to the deceased, scattering prevents *any* descendants from *ever* having a traditional gravesite to visit. Even in the cases where gravesite visitation will rarely or *never* occur, burial is the right choice – as witnessed by

the case of Moses himself, when God buried him and then hid the place of his burial (to avoid it becoming a site of idol worship). Even when it doesn't seem like there will be any visitors — the body is at rest, and has found a permanent home.

Decomposition: It's Never Pretty (Skip this section if you get queasy easily)

Many people believe cremation is quick and clean. It isn't. To quote Professor Stephen Prothero⁴:

“Think of the horrors ... of the crisping, crackling, roasting, steaming, shriveling, blazing features and hands that yesterday were your soul's delight. Think of exploding cadavers. Think of the stench of burning flesh and hair. Think of the smoke. Think of the bubbling brains. Then you will be gripped by ‘paralyzing horror’ at even the thought of ‘submitting the remains of ... dear departed relatives to its sizzling process.’ Cremation [is], in a word, repulsive: ‘There is nothing beautiful in being shoved in to an oven, and scientifically barbecued by a patented furnace’ ”

True, being eaten by worms is not pleasant either. I'm not claiming burial is 'less gross.' On a physical level, they are both pretty disgusting. Burial, however, is a natural process of decomposition that occurs to every human being. Cremation is loud, violent, and unnatural.

Financial Concerns

Cremations have the reputation of being cheap. It isn't always so. When all the side costs and hidden costs are added in, “Sheri Richardson Stahl, director of Island Funeral Home in Beaufort,

S.C., explained that, “Plenty of times, cremations are just as expensive as burials.”⁵

There is one type of cremation, however, whose costs can’t be beat: direct cremation. In this type of cremation, a cremation company is contacted online or by telephone. They send someone to pick up the body, deliver it to the crematorium, and deliver to the bereaved family a small can full of cremated remains. Costs are often between \$1,000 and \$2,000. In an age of worldwide economic difficulty, direct cremations are becoming more common. That is unfortunate.

Here is why: For some things in life, it is certainly appropriate to find the cheapest solution possible. Times are tough, and we need to live within our means. However, for some life decisions we manage to find the money to do the right thing. For example, I will do whatever is necessary to send my children to a decent school, rather than “going cheap” and putting them in a bad environment. If a loved one needs a medical procedure, I will somehow arrange to make it possible.

Choosing burial *is* important. Even in the cases when it is more expensive. Here’s why.

The Meaning of Burial

When a body is buried, the ground is opened up. A tear in the earth appears. The gaping hole declares, “Something is not right here — there is a tear in the human fabric of life. Take note, world, don’t rush through this moment. Recognize the loss. Remember the life.” When the body is gently placed in the ground, a new message is given — the calm return to nature, the source of life.

*“After decades of denying our mortality, Americans are starting to accept, if not embrace, this fundamental fact of biology: that the natural end of all life is decomposition and decay. Instead of fighting it at almost all cost as we have for the better part of the last century — with toxic chemicals, bulletproof metal caskets, and the concrete bunker that is the burial vault, all of which will only delay, not halt, the inevitable — we’re finally seeing the wisdom of allowing Mother Nature to run her natural course.”*⁶

The earth, the dirt, is indeed “the Mother of All Life.” The earth provides our sustenance, like a mother who gives birth to and feeds her young. And to it all creatures return, to begin the cycle once again. As British dramatist Francis Beaumont put it,

*“Upon my buried body lay
Lightly, gently, earth”*⁷

Returning the body of someone we cared for to the earth is a sign of love. Do we burn things we love? Think back to your first pet: “We burned the trash and buried the treasure. That is why, faced with life’s first lessons in mortality — the dead kitten or bunny rabbit, or dead bird fallen from its nest on high — most parents search out shoe boxes and shovels instead of kindling wood or barbecues...”⁸

Burial and cremation usually reflect two radically different attitudes, and two mutually exclusive ways of seeing the world and understanding our place in it. Decomposition and burning are vastly different from one another and, in many ways, complete opposites. Decomposition of a plant or living creature creates fertilizer. The intrinsic elements of the matter are not changed — rather they are given back to the ground. No wonder that the

Talmud compares burial to a type of planting.⁹

Cremation, on the other hand, leaves only burnt ashes, its elements forever changed and almost entirely burnt off. Try burning a seed before planting it — nothing will grow. In choosing cremation, humanity shows its power, but to what end?

The message of cremation is to side with man as conqueror, using fire and technology to interfere with and control nature — rather than peacefully accept it. The message of burial is one of respect for the cycle of nature.

When burying the remains of our loved ones, we calmly return what we have received. Burial reflects the rhythm of the universe.

Furthermore, burial is a Torah commandment. Deuteronomy 21:23 discusses the rare case of an evil criminal who is put to death. Even in that extreme case, the command is given, “You shall surely bury him,” teaching a general principle for all cases. The obligation to bury is so strong that even the high priest — who zealously avoided all contact with all forms of death — must personally give the dead a proper burial if no one else can do so. The Talmud, Maimonides, and the Code of Jewish Law all codify the commandment to bury the dead.¹⁰

Spiritual Ramifications

The severity, repetition, and focus on providing proper Jewish burial in the Bible, Talmud, and books of Jewish law are remarkable, and hint at its important spiritual ramifications. Jewish mystical works do much more. They explain core concepts about cremation and burial that change the way we think about death — and life. In order to begin to understand the issues (a full un-

derstanding would require too much space for this article), here is a point of departure:

Who are funerals for, anyway? It sounds like a silly question, but the answer forms the basis of many decisions made at this sensitive time. Some believe that decisions made after death — for example, whether to bury or burn, and what type of service to conduct — are for the living. To give a sense of closure. To provide comfort. After all, the dead person is ... dead. Whatever we do doesn't matter to him anyway. He or she is already in a "better place." We presume that the dead don't feel what is happening to the body, don't really care, and probably aren't even aware anyway. Mourning practices, then, are understood to be for the mourners.

The Jewish view is different. While providing comfort to the bereaved is central to Jewish tradition (and is crucial to mourning practices), it is not the only factor to be considered. The soul of the departed needs to be taken into consideration as well, and some questions (what is done with the body at the time of the funeral, for instance) focus almost exclusively on the needs of the soul, rather than on the mourners' needs.

What are the (departed) soul's needs?

In Jewish thought the body and soul are not enemies. The body enables the soul to dwell in this world, to bring meaning into daily life. Without the body, the soul could not fulfill its mission. Body and soul are partners, together for a lifetime. Since they are partners, the soul becomes attached to its body. When death occurs, the soul does not depart immediately. It still feels close to the body.

Jewish mysticism compares body and soul to a loving husband and wife. When a husband departs this world, can a loving wife immediately move on? The bond is so close that time is needed to adjust to the new reality. The soul, then, does not abandon the body immediately after death. Since it is confused and disoriented, it stays close to what it knows best — its body. It hovers around the body until burial, and shares in the mourning, going back and forth from gravesite to the shivah house.¹¹

The soul is fully aware of what is happening to ‘its’ body.¹² One way to understand this soul-knowledge is to consider that upon its departure from the physical world, the soul achieves greater closeness and knowledge of God, Who is the Source of all knowledge, and thus the soul shares in God’s knowledge of what is happening to its body on earth. This is why traditional Jewish funeral practices are marked by tremendous respect for the body — it is painful for a soul to see its body mishandled, abandoned, or defiled.

Traditional Jewish burial gives the soul great comfort, and provides the transition it requires to enter the purely spiritual world. Cremation, on the other hand, causes the soul tremendous — and unnecessary — agony. The soul cries out in pain as its partner, the body, is burned rather than caringly returned to its Source. The soul is prevented from gently returning to God, instead needing to go through a lengthy and difficult struggle to adjust to a new reality.

Despite Judaism’s great insistence on listening to parents and honoring their wishes, we can now understand why proper Jewish burial overrides a parental request for cremation: Once the

body is dead, the soul gains greater closeness to God and therefore greater understanding. It knows what pain cremation will bring and what eternal meaning burial provides. Now, the real ‘parent’ – their inner soul – wants to avoid the pain and separation of cremation more than anything we can imagine.

To Die as a Jew

Finally, for thousands of years, Jews and Judaism have insisted on proper Jewish burial. Roughly 2,000 years ago, Roman historian Tacitus wrote that “the Jews bury rather than burn their dead.”¹³ Even today, the Israel Defense Forces spends an enormous amount of time, energy, money and resources trying to ensure proper Jewish burial for its fallen. Jews will fly around the world in order to recover ancient Torah Scroll and give it a proper burial – and people are more important than even a Torah Scroll.

By choosing burial, we are aligning ourselves with Jewish history and the Jewish people. In our ‘last act’ on the planet, choosing Jewish burial means declaring, “I may not have been a perfect Jew. But I’m proud to be one, and I want to die as a Jew.”

Adapted with permission from [*Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View*](#) by Doron Kornbluth (Mosaica Press, 2012).

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1. Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 5
 2. Veerle Willaeyts, *Public Health Impact of Crematoria*, Memorial Society of British Columbia, 2007
 3. For more on burial and the environment, see: (1) Harris, Mark. *Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Nat-*

ural Way of Burial. New York: Scribner, 2007; (2) Butz, Bob. *Going Out Green: One Man's Adventure Planning His Own Natural Burial*. Traverse City, MI: Spirituality & Health Books, 2009; (3) Lubowski, Ruben N., Marlow Vesterby, Shawn Bucholtz, Alba Baez, and Michael J. Roberts. *Major Uses of Land in the United States, 2002/EIB-14*. United States Department of Agriculture: Economic Research Service, May 2006, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib14/>; (4) Wikipedia, s.v. "Cremation." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cremation>; and (5) *my own Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View* (Mosaica Press, 2012)

4. Ibid, p. 67

5. Molly Kardares, "Another Sign of the Recession — Cremation on the Rise," CBS News, March 20, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2009/03/20/business/econwatch/entry4879269.shtml>.

6. Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 186.

7. Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Maid's Tragedy*, ed. T. W. Craik (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), II:i.

8. Lynch, *The Undertaking*, 96.

9. Tractate Sanhedrin 90b and Ketubot 111b

10. Sanhedrin 46b, 29 Sefer Ha-Mitzvot 231, 536; *Laws of Mourning*, ch. 12, Yoreh Dei'ah 362.

11. Zohar 1:122b. Based on Kabbalistic sources, the Geshet HaChaim (1:117) outlines seven stages of departure: (1) Thirty days before death, the soul begins a partial separation from the body. (2) In the last hours before death, there is a further separation. (3) At the moment of death, the soul leaves the body and meets its Maker. (4) For the first three days after death, the soul is confused. It believes it will reenter the body and therefore stays closely attached to it. After three

days it ceases trying to reenter the body, but remains confused. During the shivah, the first week after death, the soul goes back and forth from the grave to the shivah house. (5) Between shivah and thirty days, the soul rises in Heaven, but is closely attached to the gravesite. (6) Between thirty days and the first year, the soul rises higher in Heaven, but still returns periodically to the gravesite. (7) After one year, it stays in Heaven, except for a small part of it that remains connected to this world and its body.

12. Talmud, Tractate Berachot 18b; Tosafot, Shabbat 153a, s.v. “venishmato”; Talmud, Tractate Sotah 34b; Rabbi Aaron Berachyah, Ma’avar Yabok 2:25; and Menashe ben israel, Nishmat Chaim 2:22.

13. Tacitus, Histories 5:5.

4

REINCARNATION AND THE HOLOCAUST

By Sara Yoheved Rigler

Why some Jews suspect they've returned.

Finding an article about reincarnation in *Scientific American* is as unlikely as finding a recipe for pork chops in a kosher cookbook. How surprised I was, therefore, to read “Ian Stevenson’s Case for the Afterlife: Are We ‘Skeptics’ Really Just Cynics?” in [*Scientific American’s* online issue](#) of November 2, 2013.

Its author, Jesse Bering, a former professor of psychology, is a self-proclaimed skeptic. “If you’re anything like me, with eyes that roll over to the back of your head whenever you hear words like ‘reincarnation’ or ‘parapsychology’ ...” he writes. And his article is a wrestling match between his own inveterate skepticism and his intellectual honesty in daring to examine the research done by the late Prof. Ian Stevenson, who held the Chair of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia.

Prof. Stevenson meticulously studied the memories of previous lives of some 3,000 children. For example, a toddler in Sri Lanka heard her mother mention the distant town of Kataragama and proceeded to tell her mother that she had drowned there when her “dumb” brother pushed her into the river. She went on to mention 30 details of her previous home, family, and neighborhood. Prof. Stevenson went to Kataragama and found a family that perfectly fit the child’s description. Their two-year-old daughter had indeed drowned in the river while playing with her mentally challenged brother. Prof. Stevenson verified 27 of the 30 statements made by the child.

After reading Stevenson’s research reports, Jesse Bering grudgingly admits: “I must say, when you actually read them firsthand, many are exceedingly difficult to explain away by ra-

tional, non-paranormal means.”

Bering then declares: “Towards the end of her own storied life, the physicist Doris Kuhlmann-Wilsdorf – whose groundbreaking theories on surface physics earned her the prestigious Heyn Medal from the German Society for Material Sciences, surmised that Stevenson’s work had established that ‘the statistical probability that reincarnation does in fact occur is so overwhelming ... that cumulatively the evidence is not inferior to that for most if not all branches of science.’”

The Jewish View

We Jews certainly never learned about reincarnation in Hebrew School. But if we dig, we discover that there are hints to reincarnation in the Bible and early commentaries ¹, while in Kabbalah, Judaism’s mystical tradition, overt references to reincarnation abound. The Zohar, the basic text of Jewish mysticism (attributed to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, a 1st century sage) assumes *gilgul neshamot* [the recycling of souls] as a given, and the Ari, the greatest of all Kabbalists, whose 16th teachings are recorded in, *Shaar HaGilgulim*, traced the reincarnations of many Biblical figures. While some authorities, such as Saadia Gaon (10th century) denied reincarnation as a Jewish concept, from the 17th century onward, leading rabbis of normative Judaism, such as the Gaon of Vilna and the Chafetz Chaim ², referred to *gilgul neshamot* as a fact.

The Ramchal, the universally-admired 18th century scholar, explained in his classic *The Way of God*: “God arranged matters so that man’s chances of achieving ultimate salvation should be

maximized. A single soul can be reincarnated a number of times in different bodies, and in this manner, it can rectify the damage done in previous incarnations. Similarly, it can also achieve perfection that was not attained in its previous incarnations.” [3:10]

Still, many Jews feel that believing in reincarnation is like believing in Santa Claus. It violates two taboos: It’s irrational and it smacks of other religions.

My Holocaust-Obsessed Childhood

Born in 1948 in suburban New Jersey to second-generation American parents with no family connection to the Holocaust, my own disbelief in reincarnation marred my growing-up years in two ways: It left me devoid of any logical explanation for my obsession with the Holocaust and my seething hatred of everything German. And it filled me with anger against God at the suffering of innocent Jews whose final chapter ended in the gas chambers of Auschwitz or the pits of Babi Yar.

I well remember the day in third grade of Hebrew school, at the age of 11, when I realized that I was not “normal.” During recess I was sitting, legs dangling, on the desk of my favorite Hebrew school teacher, Mr. Feinstein. I told him how my father had just purchased a German camera, and of course I refused to let him take my picture with it. I myself refused to buy German products and never accepted a ride in a Volkswagen. Mr. Feinstein asked me if any members of my extended family had been killed in the Holocaust. “No,” I replied.

“Do your parents hate Germans?” he probed.

“I guess not. They never talk about the Holocaust,” I answered,

clueless as to what he was getting at.

“Then why do you hate Germans so much?”

I stared at him as if he had asked me why I like chocolate milkshakes. “All Jewish kids hate Germans,” I replied, stating the obvious.

The bell announced the end of recess. My classmates filed in and took their seats, with me still sitting on the teacher’s desk. Mr. Feinstein threw out a question: “How many of you hate Germans?”

My hand shot up. Harry Davidov tentatively half-lifted his hand. No one else in the class moved.

Mr. Feinstein gazed at me without saying a word. I slithered down from his desk, feeling weird, estranged from my friends, a different species, an ugly duckling.

How could it be that my inner passions were not what all Jewish kids felt? Where *did* they come from? Who had given birth to them? I felt like I had just learned that I was adopted. My assumptions were false, the genealogy of my innermost passions shrouded in haze.

At the beginning of ninth grade, I had a dream that left me even more bewildered. Everyone in my ninth grade class was required to select a language to study for the next three years. Our choices were: French, Spanish, German, and Latin. All my friends chose French or Spanish. I chose German. When my surprised friends asked me why, I replied with steely eyes, “‘Know thine enemy.’ I want to read *Mein Kempf* in the original.”

At the end of my first week of German study, after two classes and a language lab repeating, “*Guten tag, Freulein Hess,*” I had a

convoluted dream. I woke up in the middle of it, shaking. I and everyone else in the dream had been speaking fluent German.

Trying to understand myself without a concept of reincarnation was like trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing.

Dreams and Phobias

The clues that hint at a reincarnated soul from the Holocaust are recurrent dreams, phobias, and déjà vu experiences, especially by people born in the first decade or so after the Holocaust. In the 1950s and 60s, books and movies about the Holocaust were virtually non-existent and therefore could not account for these vivid phenomena.

Jackie Warshall was born in Brooklyn in 1950 to American-born parents. When she was four years old, at night after her mother tucked her in and left her to go to sleep, little Jackie would stare into her pillow as if it were a TV set, and see a vision. She saw herself inside the back of a truck filled with women. Some of them were collapsing to the floor. Then she saw herself fly out of the truck. There, above the truck, she would feel a sense of liberation, and say, “I got out. I’m free now.”

Only decades later did she learn that the Nazis’ earliest experiment in mass murder was to pack people into a truck and pipe the carbon monoxide gas from the motor into the back of the truck.

Many years later, Jackie was teaching a fourth-grade class in a Jewish day school in Connecticut. In the library, leafing through a Holocaust book for young readers, she found a watercolor

sketch of women standing inside the back of a truck. “Standing in the library,” Jackie recounts, “I felt like a lightning bolt of recognition hit me.”

Anna B. was born in 1957 in St. Louis to a traditional Jewish family with no direct link to the Holocaust. When Anna was five years old, she began to have a recurring dream that she was being tortured in a laboratory setting. Her torturers were a doctor wearing a white coat and, incongruously, a man in a military uniform. She had this recurring dream until she was ten years old.

When she later learned about the Holocaust, Anna felt, “The Nazis were the people in my dream.” Starting in third grade, she became obsessed with the Holocaust, reading whatever Holocaust books and seeing whatever Holocaust movies were available at that time. At some point, she concluded that she had been experimented upon in Mengele’s infamous twin experiments.

Years later, Anna was invited for a Shabbos meal in New York City. When she arrived, an elderly gentleman who was a fellow guest opened the door for her. She looked at him quizzically. She knew him, but she couldn’t place from where. He also stared at her with a perplexed recognition. Finally, still standing at the doorway, he said, “I think I know you.” Anna replied, “I think I know you, too.” Neither of them, however, could figure out from where.

The connection between Anna and this man, many decades older than she, was so strong that the man’s wife started to get upset. The man and his wife had been guests in this home many times before. Over Shabbos lunch, however, the elderly man, a Holocaust survivor, revealed something that his hosts had never before heard: He had been a subject in the Mengele twin experiments.

I received the following correspondence from a Talmud scholar who detailed a recurrent nightmare he had as a child, six decades ago. He wrote: “I have never shared the following story with anyone, not even my parents, wife or closest friends.” At the end of his account, he added: “I wish to remain anonymous. Jerry Friedman was the first fictitious name that popped into my head.” So averse was he to being associated with a book about reincarnation that he even created a special Gmail account just to send me his story.

He described his recurring dream:

I was born in 1942 to American-born parents. As a young child I had a recurring nightmare. I was a child of about 7 years of age, lying on a well-worn wooden floor, my back propped up against a wall. The room was in my home, not my real home, but in my “nightmare home.” Somehow I knew that the home was in Europe, probably Poland The room was dimly lit and filled with choking smoke. I could see people on the floor who had been shot. They were my “nightmare” family.

There were several uniformed men standing in the room – the perpetrators of the slaughter. I spotted a black gun on the floor next to me and picked it up, still lying on the floor with my back propped against the wall. I held it tightly in my two hands and aimed it at the upper chest of one of the uniformed men who was standing above me. The officer – I just assumed he was an officer of some sort because of his cap – just mockingly smiled at me as if to convey that he knew I would not have the courage to pull the trigger. I looked to the right and left of the officer and noticed the other men

and their armbands with the strange symbols, X's with the ends broken back, like a pinwheel. [At that point in his childhood he was totally unfamiliar with the swastika.]

I looked back at the officer as he was slowly raising his gun towards me. I tried real hard to pull the trigger of my gun. I knew if I didn't pull it, he would shoot me. I just stared at his eyes and his mocking grin growing wider and his gun raised, pointing to my head. I wanted so much to pull the trigger of the black gun. Then the dream ends.

Since early childhood, I have had an aversion to guns, especially black guns. I still get the chills when I see one.

Nechama Bornstein, a Jewish woman from Denmark, born in 1963, had a dream as an adult:

In the dream, I was walking with a group of people, through a darkened passage. At the end of this hallway, there was a wall, made of brown wooden planks. The ceiling was low. The wall to the left was set with white-painted bricks. ... I knew that we were being taken to be punished. We had done something terrible, according to the Nazis. We were herded on, close together. ... Then right before the end of the hallway, on the right, a door was slightly open. We were pushed through it and entered a fairly large room. It was lit, but I didn't see any source of light. ...

Years later, a traveling exhibition of children's photos from Auschwitz was held in The Architect Academy in Copenhagen.

A small photograph on the wall caught my attention. ... The small photograph wasn't showing a face, but a low-ceiling hallway. My heart started pounding. I moved forward, every step seemed to

take an eternity, unfolding in another time dimension. I knew this place. There it was – the wall made of wooden planks, then that of white-painted bricks. ... I was so upset, I could hardly breathe. I reached the small photograph. This was where we had been walking [in the dream]. There was the door to the right.

A small sign beneath the photograph read: “Entrance to the gas chamber at Auschwitz.”

Perceiving God’s Love

Reincarnation turns the gas chambers of Auschwitz and the pits of Babi Yar into terrible chapter endings rather than the final conclusion of the soul’s story. Every great epic includes fearsome chapters where, for example, the heroine is abducted by the villain and subjected to torment. If that were the ending, the saga would indeed be dubbed a tragedy. But if there’s a subsequent chapter, where the villain is vanquished and the heroine – now wiser and kinder for her ordeal – is reunited with her family and goes on to live a salubrious, happy life, would you call that story a tragedy?

The most impactful words I ever heard came from the mouth of Batya Burd, [widow of Gershon Burd](#), speaking at a recent event. After her husband drowned on his 40th birthday, Batya was left a 39-year-old widow with five children under the age of ten. Some people have been asking Batya how such a tragedy could have occurred to her. Batya offered “a potential scenario just to quench the ‘Why?’”

What if, she asked hypothetically, she had been a religious girl in the Holocaust, and had seen someone very dear to her die in

front of her. And her reaction had been to deny God, abandon Jewish practice, and rail against God to as many people as would listen. As Batya postulates in her hypothetical scenario:

“What if I spoke out very strongly to people around me that there must be no God, that He must have abandoned us, and I brought others down with me.” What if she then died, and in “the World of Truth,” where the soul goes after death, she recognized her mistake and asked for a chance to rectify it. And God gave her another opportunity to “get it right and fix what I had spoiled before.”

And what if she was born again into this world, and had “a good life, and, again, God had someone very dear to me die in front of me, and this time I was going to be given ample opportunity to stay strong in my faith, and I was going to be given a platform to strengthen other people to stay strong, and in that way not only would I rectify what I had done before, but I would go even higher.

“What a good, loving, caring, compassionate God, to allow me the opportunity to rectify and perfect myself and the world around me.”

Reincarnation is a powerful lens through which God’s love and mercy can be perceived in the cataclysms of life.

I’m not asking you, dear reader, to start believing in reincarnation, only to be open-minded enough to examine the evidence. As Jesse Bering wrote in his *Scientific American* blog: “I’m not *quite* ready to say that I’ve changed my mind about the afterlife. But I can say that a fair assessment and a careful reading of Stevenson’s work has, rather miraculously, managed to pry it open.

Well, at *tad*, anyway.”

1. See Deut. 33:6, and Targum Onkeles and Targum Yonoson on that verse. Also see Isaiah 22:14.
2. *Mishnah Berurah 23:5 and Shaar HaTzion 622:6*

5

HORSE OR RIDER: WHO ARE YOU?

by Rabbi Yisroel Roll

*Understanding the human being's inner
conflict of desires.*

This morning I looked in the bathroom mirror and was startled to find someone looking back at me. I asked the image, “Who are you?”

Simultaneously, the image said to me, “Who are you?”

I answered, “Yisroel Roll.”

“I didn’t ask you your name. I asked, ‘Who are you?’”

“I am a psychotherapist.”

“I didn’t ask you what you did for a living. I asked, ‘Who are you?’”

I tried again, “I am the husband of Julie, and father of...”

“I didn’t ask what your relationships were. I asked, ‘Who are you?’”

Persevering, I ventured, “I have a home in Baltimore, I drive a...”

The image cut me off. “I didn’t ask what you owned. I asked, ‘Who are you?’”

Exasperated, I responded, “Ok, I give up. Who am I?”

The image said, “You are a horse.”

“A horse! What in the world do you mean?”

“Horses like to graze on the meadow and I happen to know that you like to graze over a well-done rib steak with Southern barbecue sauce.”

I said, “That’s a pretty broad comparison. You’ll have to do better than that.”

He boldly replied, “When horses run in the meadow, there is always one horse that tries to run ahead of the pack, chased by the others. In your career, you always try to come up with new ideas and programs so that you too can run ahead of the compe-

tition. So, you are just like a horse.”

Getting a little nervous, I stuttered, “Not bad. What else do you have?”

He said, “When a filly enters the meadow, the stallions get up on their hind legs and begin to neigh. When your wife enters the room, you adjust your tie and act differently. So, you are a horse.”

After having been compared not too inaccurately to a horse, I defiantly said, “Just a minute. I may have certain basic qualities similar in nature to a horse, but I am not a horse. I am the *rider* of the horse. I can direct and determine what and when I eat, what career I pursue and how I develop it, and I can control my inner passions and desires. I can direct my horse-like tendencies and guide them. I can raise myself above the level of the horse within me by reminding myself it is I who is in the saddle. So I can direct myself to meaningful activities because I am in control of the reins.”

The horse within me is only the lowest part of my psyche – the animal-like part of my being. It is true that, like a horse, I have instincts, lusts, and passions that drive me. Those impulses for self-preservation (i.e., food), self-gratification (i.e., pleasure), and power (i.e., money), rage so powerfully within me that I am sometimes convinced that these drives make up the sum total of my being. But that is not all I am. The rider within me can direct these passions and animal instincts. The rider is the core of my real self – the part of me that decides which passions to pursue, which to delay pursuing, and which not to pursue at all.

The rider within me allows me to discern between worthwhile and meaningless activities. It allows me to appreciate sensations

like beauty, symmetry, and harmony. It allows me to choose to pursue spiritual endeavors like kindness, empathy, and fairness. It inspires me to pursue values like truth, honesty, and loyalty. It allows me to look inward and to become aware of my “self.”

This core, this rider within me, is my soul. It is the source of my decision-making process. It is the life energy that activates and motivates me. This is the source from which I can draw my hidden strength in order to help me meet life’s challenges.

If we stop running through life and take a moment to reflect upon our inner values and character, we will be able to get in touch with our soul. By so doing we will be able to get to know more of our authentic self. What a wonderful self-empowering feeling to be able to perform a quick “quality control” check on ourselves to ensure that we are channeling our drives and passions in the direction that our soul wants them to go, rather than allowing our passions to drive us.

Our soul enables us to summon all of the strengths, passions, and drives within us to deal with a challenge from a position of conscious choice rather than with our usual knee-jerk instinctive reactions. Our soul gives us the strongest resource at our disposal – it provides the power and inner strength for us to choose how to deal with a challenge from a considered, informed vantage point. And we can access and activate this inner strength at will, any time we choose.

Nourishing the Soul

The soul is God’s ambassador. When you listen to your soul’s yearnings and nourish them, then you are relating to the Godli-

ness within you which develops your spirituality. The soul is not nourished with the same things that the body may crave. A new car, a steak or a beautifully remodeled kitchen will not do anything to satisfy the soul.

A story is told of the king's daughter who fell in love with a peasant farmer. They got married and he tried to provide for her needs. He brought her the things that made him happy – finely ground alfalfa, an aged and masterfully dried out salami and some fresh fish just caught down by the creek. But no matter how hard he tried to please her, she was never satisfied, because she was used to the finer things in life.

The king's daughter represents the soul and the peasant farmer is the body. The body tries to satisfy the soul by bringing it physical pleasures. But the soul is not rooted in the physical world, but in the spiritual world. The soul, therefore, craves spiritual satisfaction. It wants to be nourished by things like honesty, kindness, wisdom, and truth.

But if earthly pleasures are all we know, how can we ever hope to satisfy our soul? The answer is that lust, passion and a kosher hot dog at the ball game are not the only pleasures we know. There are deeper, more meaningful and more lasting pleasures – spiritual “delights” that are even better than a refreshing swim on a hot day.

You can decide to act instinctively or impulsively, or you can look at a given situation and choose to react spiritually. The act of deciding between right and wrong, between spiritual and physical paths, is the soul's domain.

The decision-making part of our soul – although given by

God – is not controlled by God. God has given us free will. If we choose to live our lives satisfying only our physical desires, or if we choose to act destructively or to cause others pain, God will not intervene because removing our free will would undermine His ultimate purposed in creating us. We would be preprogrammed robots. God wants us to make moral choices since it is only through exercising our free will that our souls can grow and achieve their potential.

Another dimension of the exercise of our free will is how we react to the challenges that God sends our way. We can choose to be angry with God for giving us a rough ride and expend energy being depressed and frustrated. Alternately, we can access our soul and discover what God wants us to learn from this situation. We can thus choose to exercise our free will proactively and positively, by working through the issues God is presenting to us, and grow through the experience. God does not benefit from our choosing the spiritual pathway; we do. We get an opportunity to grow in personality and character.

If God preprogrammed us to act as He wanted, the world might be a nicer place, but it would be a preprogrammed world, lacking in meaning and connection. God created the world so that you and I could choose to make it a decent place out of our own free will and thereby earn our spiritual reward. This world is for choosing between good and evil, and the world after this one – the World to Come – is for receiving reward for the choices we have made.

Of course, we may get certain physical rewards in this world as God's investment in us, to allow us to continue to choose correct-

ly in the spiritual aspects of our lives. But the ultimate reward for our positive choices will be in the World to Come, which is also a world of body and soul, albeit on a much higher level than the current world. As Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (Rmachal) states, "...in the renewed world, man will enjoy his reward with body and soul." (Derech Hashem 1:3:10).

Where on earth, then, is this "World to Come"? It is right here. When we perform positive acts of kindness or make other spiritual choices, we create positive spiritual energy. This spiritual energy accumulates in the spiritual dimension that co-exists simultaneously with This World. This spiritual energy is our World to Come. That is why the next world is not called "That World." Rather, it is called the World to Come, which comes *out of* This World. It is The World which "comes out" of This World. When we transition from This World of trial and travail into the World to Come, we will be able to access and we will live in this spiritual energy that we ourselves have created while in This World. It is in the World to Come that we will awaken to full consciousness and enjoy the true root of our actions in this world.