

# Judaism: The Journey of the Soul

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## THE MAINSTREAM: AN OVERVIEW

In the Jewish tradition, death is considered an integral part of the experience of life, leading from the antechamber of this life into the next. The time of transition of the soul from its incarnation in the physical body to the beginning of its journey in the next is considered to be a time of great sacredness, for if man is created in the image of God, then the form that once contained that soul is now relieved of its task, and the godly soul begins its return to its divine source.

Judaism has developed a large body of quite specific rituals and traditions with which to mark this time of transition, and these are intended to assist in the process of the separation of the soul from the body. Inherent in these traditions is the understanding that those remaining in life, the mourners, by their actions, contribute significantly to the separation, elevation, and transformation of the soul.

Before death comes, it is considered to be of great merit to recite the "Viddui," the confessional, with the dying. If it is possible for the dying person to recite the "Viddui" on his own, he should do so. If it is not possible, then one close to him should recite the confessional on his behalf, seeking forgiveness for his sins, asking for healing, even at this extreme time, but accepting the divine decree whatever it is to be.

It is considered immensely significant to be with the dying in their final moments and to witness and to assist the soul's passing into the next realm. The eyes of the deceased are to be closed by those present and a sheet or covering drawn over their face.

The body should be placed with feet facing the door and with a candle placed at the head of the deceased. This time is also one for family and friends to offer prayers, asking forgiveness of the deceased for any wrongs they may have caused him during his life.

If death occurs at home, all mirrors are covered, both to avoid instances of personal vanity in the face of death, and, it is said, to acknowledge the now diminished image of God in the once animated human form.

While it is traditional to recite Psalms in the presence of the deceased, Psalms 23 and 91 are particularly included in this recital. Since the deceased may not be left alone at any time from death to interment, a *shomer*, or watchman, is appointed, preferably from the family, to remain with the body and recite Psalms throughout this period.

In the presence of the deceased, only the highest degree of respect may be exhibited. It is forbidden to eat, drink, or smoke in their presence, and only positive thoughts and recollections may be shared concerning them.

The Chevra Kaddisha, the burial society, is to be called to care for the remains. It is the responsibility of the Chevra Kaddisha to deal with all medical/legal issues, and to make arrangements for the interment. Among the most important tasks of the Chevra Kaddisha, and one considered to be of the greatest merit, is the Taharah, the ritual purification of the body before burial. Not only does Taharah require the physical cleansing and preparation of the body, but also those performing Taharah are required to recite specific prayers asking God to forgive the sins of the departed and to grant his soul eternal peace. Those who perform Taharah must be fully trained, themselves highly qualified, on a personal and spiritual level, to render such a holy act.

The Jewish tradition requires that all Jews must be buried in a plain, white shroud made of muslin, cotton, or linen, for at death all stand equal before God. It is also taught that at a time when a person stands before his Maker, he should do so in simplicity and dignity. For males, the *tallit* or prayer shawl is then wrapped around him.

According to Jewish law, the deceased is to be interred in a plain wooden coffin, with no extraneous decoration whatsoever. In fact, since nothing is to hinder the decomposition of the body, holes are sometimes made in the bottom of the coffin to assist this process. Therefore, the use of lined caskets meant to prevent decomposition of the body is a clear violation of Jewish law.

It is also a custom to place a small amount of soil from the land of Israel inside the coffin with the deceased as an aid to the final resurrection of the dead at the time of the coming of the Messiah.

According to Jewish tradition, burial is to be performed as soon after death as possible, preferably on the same day, but certainly within twenty-four hours after death. It is understood in the tradition that for a body to linger once its soul has moved on to the next world is shameful, for the body is now only a vestige of what it once was. Only under specific circumstances (which may add to the honor of the dead) may burial be delayed, such as the need to wait for relatives to arrive for the funeral service from long distances away.

Prior to the funeral service, *kriyah* is performed, the ritual rending of a garment of the mourners, with the accompanying statement that "the Lord has given and now taken.... He is the judge of truth." In Jewish law, a mourner, with specific ritual responsibilities to the deceased, is defined as father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, or spouse.

The funeral service itself is brief, simple, and intense. It is focused on the honor and dignity of the deceased and the reality of death. It is not intended to be a time of consolation for mourners, which it nonetheless is by virtue of those who join to share in the mourner's loss. More to the point, however, the funeral service is intended to focus on the life, now ended, of the deceased, and to join together in sending the soul off to its journey in the next world. It is understood that it is from all the mourners and their prayer, as well as the *Mitzvot*, the good deeds, they perform in memory of the deceased, that its soul receives the energy to elevate its level in the World to Come.

Burial in the earth is considered the only appropriate way to bring the body to its resting place, so that it may return to the dust from which it came. Thus, cremation is forbidden by Jewish law, as are vaults and mausoleums. Furthermore, it is considered an act of great merit for those attending the burial to assist in the filling of the grave with earth. It is a profound statement of the finality of death and of the concern of all in attendance that the body of the dead is properly returned to its source.

Within the body of burial service, the burial Kaddish, a doxology in praise of God, is recited by the mourners, and in somewhat shorter form, it is recited by the mourners three times a day at each of the required daily prayer services (for the next eleven months). The main responsibility for the Kaddish recitation falls on a child to be enacted for the parent. In the Orthodox Jewish tradition, this typically manifests as the son saying Kaddish for his parents throughout the approximately year-long period of mourning. The tradition teaches that this forms a binding link between the generations, and it is through the energy of the recitation of the Kaddish that the soul of the deceased may elevate.

With the conclusion of the burial service begins Shivah, the seven-day period of mourning during which the mourners remain at home, comforted by visitations from family and friends. Shivah is most assuredly not a social occasion. Indeed, the tradition teaches that we may not speak

until the mourner speaks to us first and that the conversation should focus on the qualities of the deceased or the well-being of the mourners.

The Shivah period is itself divided into two, with the first three days encompassing the period of deepest mourning and the last four days beginning our slow readjustment to the world around us. Only at the end of Shivah may one return to work and begin normal day-to-day activities.

About a year after the burial, a Matzevah, a monument, is erected and consecrated over the grave as a permanent memorial for the deceased. Also, a year after burial is the observance of the Yartzit, the anniversary of the death of the deceased. It is a special time for the recitation of the Kaddish and the performance of good deeds in memory of the departed loved one. Also, four times a year—on Yom Kippur, Pesach, Shemini Atzeret, and Shavuot—Yizkor, memorial prayers on behalf of the departed, is recited.

It is apparent from this description that in the Jewish tradition, the departed are intimately interwoven into family and community life, remembered, and prayed for and are the object of meritorious and special deeds throughout the year. From the perspective of the Jewish mystical tradition, the Kabbalah, this is understood to be the result of the intimate connection between soul, even after death, and its energetic relationship with those in the world left behind, as it moves onward on its journey of transformation and elevation. While offering interpretations often unique and originally different from the mainstream Jewish tradition, the Kabbalah teaches a rich, insightful, and detailed understanding of the soul as it moves along its journey both within its life in the physical world, as well as along its journey in the postmortem world of the After-life. It is to the mystical texts that we now turn.

#### THE MYSTICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF DEATH: AN INTRODUCTION

In the Jewish tradition, death is understood as the separation of the eternal, spiritual soul from the material body, the two of which were joined together at the time of conception. While the physical body returns to the ground of matter from which it originated, the eternal soul begins its journey of transition from this world to the next, as it tends to its task of elevation, refinement, and transformation.

According to the Jewish tradition, the soul retains memory of its lifetime on earth, and in its individuality, it is held accountable for its actions and thoughts while incarnate in a physical body. Therefore, death marks a radical transition from physical life in this world, but it does not end consciousness and awareness of personal identity, nor does it end the spiritual demand for continuous internal refinement.

In fact, all of the Jewish customs regarding death and dying, as outlined above, serve to assist the soul in its metaphysical adventure in the World to Come. For example, at the time of the Yartzit, the anniversary

of the death, Jews not only remember the departed, but also seek to elevate the soul to a higher level through the performance of good deeds, such as the giving of charity and the learning of Torah. The specific statement is made to the family, "May the soul of the departed experience an elevation."

Indeed, there are some traditions at which family members visit the graves of the departed at this time of *Yarzeit*, not only to remember the departed and be reminded of the brevity and fragility of life, but, more importantly, to seek advice and counsel from them. This clearly implies the notion that the dead know of the activities of the living in the physical world, are concerned with their welfare, and, in the appropriate manner, can be of assistance and insight.

At the time of *Yizkor*, the memorial prayers recited for the departed at major Jewish festivals, a similar wish is expressed for the elevation and refinement of the departed soul, with the hope that the soul now resides in the Garden of Eden, one of the levels of Paradise.

Most important is the requirement for a mourner, as defined by Jewish law, to recite the *Kaddish* doxology three times a day for the departed for a period of eleven months. As with *Shivah*, the common perception is that *Kaddish* is recited for the healing of the grief of the mourner. In truth, *Kaddish* is an obligation upon the mourner in order to assist in the elevation of the soul of the departed. This teaching is a very pointed one: first, that souls require human energy and intent to succeed in their process of elevation and second, that humans have the ability to affect the welfare of the departed just as the departed are capable of being of assistance to us in this physical world.

The Jewish mystical tradition, the *Kabbalah*, teaches that souls not only seek to transform and elevate themselves in the afterlife, but also do so as well while incarnated in physical bodies, for the transformational work of souls is never-ending. The *Alter Rebbe*, the first *Chabad Rebbe*, speaks of souls as literally being part of God Himself, and as such, their seeking to elevate back to their divine source is a constant expression of their very nature. Thus, within the *Kabbalah*, a fully developed typology exists describing the journey of souls both within life in this world and in the next.

#### JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

The mystical tradition teaches that the embodied soul is understood to be constantly on a journey of refinement and elevation. We are taught that the soul consists of five levels. From lowest to highest they are *nefesh*, the vital soul; *ruach*, the level of emotional interaction with the world; *neshamah*, the intellectual soul; *chayah*, the level of soul that is part of all that lives; and *yechidah*, the unitary oneness with all that is.

Further, the Kabbalistic tradition teaches that each level of soul contains within itself all other levels of soul as well. It is these levels of soul, and their sublevels, which themselves define the parameters of the soul's work of elevation while incarnated into physicality. Therefore, a soul may begin its journey within physical incarnation on the lowest of levels, that "of *nefesh* of *nefesh*," and spend an entire lifetime in this world completing and rectifying that level. Conversely, although quite unusual, it may happen that a soul rectifies the *nefesh* levels of *both nefesh* of *nefesh* and *ruach* of *nefesh* in one embodied incarnation, moving on in the next reincarnation to rectify the level of *neshamah* of *nefesh*. The sixteenth-century mystic, the Ari'zal, taught that we rectify and elevate a soul level through the study of the Torah and the keeping of its *Mitzvot*, its commandments, on the appropriate soul level.

Implicit in this Kabbalistic structure and process of embodied soul refinement is the necessary reincarnation of the soul over numerous incarnations. Therefore, from the Kabbalistic perspective, the soul's journey of elevation and rectification is not limited to the embodied state only, but includes as well postmortem soul refinement and transformation following each reincarnation into the embodied state, with postmortem soul rectification itself influencing the level and *tikkun*, type and quality of life task, of the following embodied incarnation. Thus, the journey of the soul encompasses both realms, this world and the next, with each aspect of the journey influencing the soul work of the other.

It is the purpose of this chapter to describe the postmortem journey of the soul as described in selections from the Jewish mystical literature, specifically, the *Zohar*, the Book of Splendor, and related texts. Within the *Zohar*, which will be our main source in this chapter, are contained numerous and extensive descriptions of the various stages through which the postmortem soul travels—from impending death and the separation of the soul from the body; interment; transition from this world; cleansing; self-evaluation; Gehinnom (hellish existence); Lower Paradise; further soul evaluation; Upper Paradise; the Bond of Life and the Divine Throne; and finally, the soul's return to the physical world through reincarnation informed by its *tikkun*, life task.

#### THE PREDEATH PROCESS ACCORDING TO THE KABBALAH

The *Zohar* describes how, at the time of death, the four elements that combine to constitute the human body as container of the soul—earth, water, fire, and air—begin to quarrel among themselves. This same text tells us that when the day comes for a person to depart from the world, four quarters of the world indict him, as it were, with punishments rising up from all four directions. At this time, a voice goes forth and makes a proclamation, the *Zohar* explains, that is heard throughout the cosmos.

If it is deemed at that time that a man is worthy, all dimensions of existence welcome him with intense happiness, but if not, that person will suffer greatly.<sup>1</sup>

This separation of the soul from the body is not a process of a moment's duration, for the *Zohar* teaches that this separation occurs over a period of thirty days, during which profound changes begin to occur in the body and soul relationship. Specifically, the text tells us that, when death approaches, a bold announcement about the dying person is made for thirty days, with even the birds of heaven proclaiming his fate; if such a person is particularly virtuous, the *Zohar* further reports, his fruitful journey is announced for thirty days among the righteous in the Garden of Eden.<sup>2</sup> It is also mentioned that during these thirty days a person's soul departs from his body every night, ascending to the other world; here, he looks carefully at his place to be.<sup>3</sup>

The *Zohar* further teaches that this progressive separation of the soul from the body can be a most difficult experience:

For love is strong as death: It is strong like the parting of the spirit from the body, as we have learnt that when man is about to depart from the world and sees strange things, his spirit courses through all his limbs and goes up and down like a boatman without oars who is tossed up and down on the seas and makes no progress. It then asks leave of each limb; and its separation is only effected with great violence.<sup>4</sup>

The *Zohar* elaborates on this theme of difficulty in regard to the soul and body's separation, adding as well the notion that this also represents a time of great judgment and the beginning of a long journey of soul rectification. The text tells us that there is no solution for such a man unless he repents in due course. Otherwise, until his very last moment, he knows great fear, hopelessly endeavoring to hide himself in terrible shame. The *Zohar* further informs us that such a person is forced to gaze upon "the Angel of Death," ultimately surrendering himself to his inevitable fate.<sup>5</sup> This is considered the moment of "the Great Judgment"—an experience all will be subjected to in this world.

The spirit actually undergoes a journey through its own body, struggling with each separate member, or limb, as it parts from it; as the soul does this, each limb withers away. The *Zohar* offers graphic detail in this regard: When the spirit is about to make its final exit from the body, having thus dealt with each limb, the Shekinah stands over the empty shell, and the spirit continues its journey, leaving the body behind.<sup>6</sup> The rabbis of the *Zohar* tell us: "Happy is the portion of whoever cleaves to Her! Woe to the sinners who keep afar from Her!"<sup>7</sup>

"Indeed," reflect the writers of the *Zohar*, "what a number of ordeals man has to undergo in passing out of this world!"<sup>8</sup> The text then makes

a list of seven such ordeals: (1) The first is when the spirit leaves the body, as just described. (2) The second is when his actions and statements precede him and proclamations are made concerning each of them. (3) Another ordeal manifests when entering the tomb, or one's burial place. (4) And then there is the tomb itself, which is ghastly for the spirit, as (5) its body soon undergoes an ordeal being eaten by worms. After this, (6) one approaches Gehinnom, a sort of hell for the soul. Finally, (7) there is the constant roaming in the world, yet again, in which the spirit finds no resting place, at least until its necessary tasks are accomplished and it is able to move on. According to the *Zohar*, these are the seven ordeals through which all must pass.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the text proclaims, "it behooves man while in this world to acknowledge his Master. One should also carefully examine his daily works, sincerely repenting any misdeeds he may have committed before his Maker."<sup>10</sup>

Jewish mystical texts further inform us that when man's judgment hour is near, a new spirit enters into him from above, and he is able to see things that he could not see before; this occurs just before he departs from the world. So it is written: "For man shall not see me and live; in their lifetime they may not see, but at the hour of death they may."<sup>11</sup>

The question remains, however: What indeed is the vision that the dying person sees at this time of soul transition? The *Zohar* suggests a number of possibilities. First is that the dying man sees Adam, the first man.<sup>12</sup> A second *Zohar* tradition states that a person on his deathbed will see the Shekhinah:

R. Eleazar said: "When a man is on the point of leaving this world, his soul suffers many chastisements along with his body before they separate. Nor does the soul actually leave him until the Shekhinah shows herself to him, and then the soul goes out in joy and love for the Shekhinah. If he is righteous, he cleaves and attaches himself to Her. But if not, then the Shekhinah departs, and the soul is left behind, mourning for its separation from the body, like a cat which is driven away from the fire."<sup>13</sup>

The above *Zohar* text would seem to indicate that depending on the righteousness of the dying person, different qualities of visions and their implications occur, leading to different pathways to be traversed by the departing soul. This point is further emphasized in *Zohar* I, which tells us that by one's acts, by one's words, and by one's intensity of devotion, one draws to himself that spirit from on high.<sup>14</sup> The same section of the *Zohar* relates that if a man attaches himself in this world, he will find himself similarly attached in the next one: If he is holy in this life, he will be holy in the next, and if he is defiled, that's what he will know in the world to come. But he is still a soul, moving ever closer to his source.

It would seem, then, that all souls departing this world merit seeing the Shekhinah. However, whether a soul is allowed to then cleave to the



Shekhinah, or is deserted by Her, depends on the worthiness of the soul's life on earth. Further, being deserted by the Shekhinah implies that one will be drawn to the side of uncleanness, making the challenges of the Afterlife far more foreboding.

To be thorough: A third tradition concerning deathbed visions is that of seeing deceased relatives and friends who come to assist the soul on its journey, its destination depending on the person's merit acquired in this life.<sup>15</sup>

The principle of judgment is central to the *Zohar's* understanding of the postdeath process. As a result, it also speaks at some length of deathbed visions as pertaining to the judgment that awaits all souls in the world to come. Therefore, a fourth tradition of vision is that of the "Life Review," both on the part of God and on that of the individual. As the *Zohar* says, three appointed messengers descend upon the dying man—one of them will make a record of all that person's meritorious deeds, as well as his misdeeds; a second messenger tallies up and concludes with a reckoning of his days; and the third is a special entity who has accompanied the dying man from the time when he was in his mother's womb.<sup>16</sup>

It's described that when God desires to take back a man's spirit to His own kingdom, all that person's days pass in review before Him. The only people who can properly rejoice, then, are those who have lived a righteous life—for the *Zohar* says that they draw ever nearer to God. But those who were consciously wicked throughout their days will not "draw near," and of them it is written: "The way of the wicked is like thick darkness, they know not on what they stumble." (Prov. IV, 19).<sup>17</sup>

The *Zohar* is clear: "On the day when man's time arrives to depart from the world, when the body is broken and the soul seeks to leave it, on that day man is privileged to see things that he was not permitted to see before, when the body was in full vigor." And again it says, "Every man seals his fate with his own hand": He will be judged in the next world for all his actions, former and later, old and new, not one of them is forgotten—every man must acknowledge his works, for all the deeds that he committed give an abiding account of his next destination.<sup>18</sup>

A fifth tradition of deathbed vision is that of the Angel of Death. Unlike some of the more benign visions previously discussed, this is a vision of intensity and fear, leading to the final separation of body and soul, and of a person's ultimate surrender to this particular angel. The *Zohar* describes a fearful scenario: The Angel of Death's officer advances toward the dying man, holding in his hand a sharp sword. At that moment, the man looks up and sees the wall of his house in a blaze of fire—with he himself as the culprit. After this, he sees before him a demon with eyes all over his body, clothed in fiery garments. The very sight of this being causes tremendous fear, as the dying person's body shivers uncontrollably.

The *Zohar* again informs us that there is no alleviation for such a man unless he repents in due course. Until his last moments, he subsists in fear.

Aware of his own helplessness, he opens his eyes and gazes at the Angel of Death with full consciousness, surrendering himself, body and soul. It is, again, the moment of the Great Judgment, to which man must be subjected as part of life in this world. But then, when the spirit is about to depart, having thus taken leave of the whole body, acknowledging each of his bodily limbs, the Shekinah stands over the body—and the spirit leaves for his next destination. The *Zohar* affirms: “Happy is the portion of whoever cleaves to Her! Woe to the sinner who keep afar from Her!”<sup>19</sup> The text further states, “Hence a man should constantly be in fear of that great day, the Day of Judgment, the day of reckoning, when there be none to defend him save his own good deeds that he performed in this world.”<sup>20</sup>

The importance of Torah study is then underlined: “Now the soul of one who has labored in the study of the Torah, when it leaves this world, ascends by the way and paths of the Torah—ways and paths familiar to them. They who know the ways and paths of the Torah in this world follow them in the other world when they leave this life.”<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, for the righteous, the moment of death is painless and effortless, “like drawing a hair out of milk,” whereas for the wicked, it is a moment of agitation and pain, like “pulling a tangled rope through a narrow opening.”<sup>22</sup> This is the sum and substance of Judaic teaching on death and dying.

#### POSTDEATH EXPERIENCE

Jewish texts speak of a complex process of postdeath interaction between the body and the soul. According to these sources, while death results from the separation of the soul from the body, the soul nonetheless remains in the vicinity of the body for a time even after the separation.

According to the *Zohar*, once the Angel of Death removes the soul from a person’s body, death occurs instantaneously. At that point, the person’s spirit comes out and sits on the tip of the nose until the body begins to decay. After this, the spirit is taken to the courtyard of the dead, to join other such spirits in an interim state.<sup>23</sup>

Not only does the soul remain in the vicinity of the body immediately after death, but it also travels back and forth between the grave and its former home, aware of all that takes place there:

For seven days the soul goes back and forth—from his house to his grave and from his grave to his house—mourning for the body. This corroborates that which has already been written: “His flesh shall suffer pain for him, and his soul shall mourn for it” (Job XIV, 22), and it grieves to behold the sadness in the house.<sup>24</sup>

Seven days constitute the period of Shivah, the period of sitting and mourning by the family for the deceased. The implication of this *Zohar*

text is that during this period, the soul seeks to retain its ties to the people and places it knew so well in life. Further, the *Zohar* suggests that disembodied souls retain consciousness and memory and retain awareness of events occurring in the physical world. This closeness continues until the soul becomes aware of and saddened by the inevitable disintegration of the physical body in the grave. The *Zohar* states, "... and as for the *nefesh*, it wanders around the world, observing the body that was once its home, now devoured by worms and suffering the judgment of the grave. This leads to intense mourning."<sup>25</sup>

Another version of the soul remaining near the body after death is found in *Midrash Rabbah* (18:1): "For three days [after death] the soul hovers over the body, intending to re-enter it, but as soon as it sees its [the body's] appearance change, it departs...."

According to the *Zohar*, the viewing by the soul of the disintegration of the body in the grave is a most painful experience and is considered to be one of the trials it must endure in its postdeath journey. Not only is the experience a painful one, but it attests to the soul irrefutably that its place in physicality is now itself disintegrating and that it must move on. The process is known as *Chibut Hakever*, the "Purgatory of the Grave," and can only be averted by the good deeds acquired during one's lifetime.

#### **KAF HAKELAH: THE HOLLOW OF THE SLING**

After the separation of the soul from the body, a process begins of eliminating impurities from the soul, which remain from its physical existence with the body, preparing the soul for its future journey. If a soul is deemed worthy, it may be spared the experience; if not, it must submit. Like *Chibut Hakever*, *Kaf Hakelah* can only be avoided through good deeds, learning of the Torah, and the performance of the *Mitzvot* (following of the commandments) one has acquired and achieved during his lifetime.

The *Zohar* confirms this, adding that those who defile their body through sinful and degraded acts are "tossed about like a stone from a sling. Woe to them! Who shall plead for them?"<sup>26</sup> Conversely, the same text teaches that righteous people are happy and God is pleased to take them back to Himself. "But if a man is not deemed worthy," says the *Zohar*, "woe to his spirit, which has to be purified and to be prepared before it can bask in the Body of the King. And if it is not prepared, it, too, must roll about 'like a stone in a sling'" (cf. I Samuel).<sup>27</sup>

#### **THE CELESTIAL GARMENT**

Now that *Chibut Hakever* and *Kaf Hakelah* have cleansed the soul of much of the physicality in which it had previously been immersed, it is

now given a new garment—a spiritual body—to sustain itself in the transcendent realm:

When souls ascend to the place of the “bundle of life” (v. I Sam. XXV, 29), they feast their eyes on the beams of the “refulgent mirror,” which radiates from the most sublime region. And were the soul not clothed in the resplendency of another (i.e., non-flesh) garment, it would not be able to approach the effulgence. The esoteric doctrine is that in the same way as the soul has to be clothed in a bodily garment in order to exist in this world, so is she given an ethereal supernal garment wherewith to exist in the other world, and to be enabled to gaze at the effulgence of life radiating from that “land of the living.”<sup>28</sup>

Yet another section of the *Zohar* tells us more along these same lines. First is that until the soul is divested of its physical garment and given new supernal clothing, it cannot proceed along its spiritual journey. Secondly, that this supernal garment is the same one that the soul had to remove before entering this physical world. In essence, the *Zohar* suggests that, after death, we again put on our own garment that was ours prior to our incarnation into physicality and in which we experience great joy.

The text further tells us that all the images and forms of this material world were fashioned after those in the Spiritual Kingdom. This Kingdom is the abode of all spirits, both of those that have appeared in this world and also of those who have not yet come here. Those who are about to come are given “garments,” i.e., faces and bodies, like those from above, and they gaze upon the glory of their Lord until the time comes for them to appear in the material world.<sup>29</sup>

According to the *Zohar*, many souls make their abode in this world in the garments and bodies fashioned from the seed of suitable parents. So when the time comes for the spirit to leave this world again, it cannot do so until the Angel of Death has taken off the garment known as this body. Once this process is completed, the spirit again puts on that other garment in the spiritual realm, of which he had had to divest himself when he entered this world of matter. The text concludes by mentioning that the soul’s real joy is in the celestial body, not in his material form. In that higher body, he rests and moves, all while contemplating the supernal mysteries of life—even though, when he was in his earthly body, he could neither grasp nor understand them.<sup>30</sup>

It should be noted that the celestial garment is not available to all souls, only to the worthy. As the *Zohar* informs us, “If the soul is worthy and wears its precious protecting garments, multitudes of holy hosts stand ready to join her and accompany her to Paradise. But if she is not deemed worthy of that garment, the ‘strange’ hosts compel her to take the path that leads to Gehenna. These are angels of destruction and confusion, and they gladly take their revenge on wayward souls.”<sup>31</sup>

## GEHENNA

The intent of Gehenna, Purgatory, is not for punishment alone. In the *Zohar*, it becomes clear that the purpose of Gehenna is for refinement and purification of the soul from the dross of sin and physicality, making it possible for the soul to progress to the next supernal level, that of the Lower Garden of Eden. Certainly there are specific areas of Gehenna for specific types of sinners, but for all, the period of confinement in Gehenna is at most twelve months, with only the few most incorrigible souls remaining in the level of Gehenna known as Abbadon.

This is confirmed in the *Zohar* as follows: "Sinners are subjected to Gehenna for twelve months, half with fire, half with snow. When they go into the fire they say: 'This is really Gehenna!' When they go into the snow they say the same. The supreme punishment is with snow."<sup>32</sup>

But the text goes further. It tells us that the Holy One eventually raises them out of Gehenna, after they have undergone sufficient purification. At this time, they remain sitting at its gate, and when they see sinners enter there to be punished, they ask for mercy on their behalf. In time, the Holy One shows pity and brings them to a certain place for their betterment.<sup>33</sup>

The soul soon rises from Gehenna, says the *Zohar*, purified of its guilt like iron purified in fire, and she is carried up to the Lower Garden of Eden. Here the soul is cleansed in the waters of Paradise and perfumed with its spices. The soul will remain here until the appropriate time, when she departs from the abode of the righteous. After this, she is carried up toward the Supreme Destination, step by step, like a sacrifice to the altar.<sup>34</sup>

The *Zohar* gives exacting detail: At first, the text relates, the soul is taken to an area called Ben-Hinnom, where souls are cleansed and purified before they enter the Lower Paradise. Two angel messengers stand at the gate of Paradise, calling out to the leaders who are in charge of that portion of Gehenna. They repeatedly ask the powers that be to receive the expected soul who is now approaching, and during the entire process of purification they continue to utter the word *hinnom*, which means, "Here they are." When the process is finally over, those in charge take the soul from Gehenna and lead it to the gate of Paradise. At that point, they again say to the angel messengers standing there: "Hinnom, behold, here is the soul that has come out pure and white." The soul is then brought into the realm of Paradise.<sup>35</sup>

Most interestingly, the *Zohar* teaches that in the midst of a soul's twelve-month period in Gehenna, its punishment ceases each Sabbath, the day of rest, for the peace of the Sabbath extends even to the depths of Gehenna itself:

Every Sabbath evening, when the day is sanctified, heralds are sent to proclaim throughout all of Gehenna: "Please stop punishing the sinful! The Holy King has

arrived; the Sabbath is about to know sanctification. And so they are all under His protection.” Because of this, all chastisements cease and the wicked find repose for a certain time.<sup>36</sup>

#### THE LOWER PARADISE

The *Zohar* describes how a soul, upon completing its time in Gehenna, is prepared, while still in the hellish region, for its elevation to the Lower Paradise, as described above.

Also as noted previously, change of spiritual status is reflected in a change of garments, which more appropriately reflects the newly elevated status of the soul.

As the *Zohar* says, a man’s soul does not appear before the Supreme unless she is first deemed worthy in terms of her divine raiment. In the same way, the soul does not manifest in the material world unless she is clad in appropriate garments. The text further tells us that even heavenly angels—if they need to execute a message in this world for one purpose or another—do not appear here unless they clothe themselves in the proper garments of this world. In other words, the “attire” always has to be in harmony with the place visited.<sup>37</sup>

As described by the *Zohar*, the Lower Paradise is itself a place of further preparation for souls, who, when and if found worthy, then ascend to the Upper Paradise itself, the ultimate goal of all souls. Yet the difference between the Lower and Upper Paradise is considered to be enormous: “... those who have not merited to ascend so high are assigned a lower place according to their deserts. They are stationed in the lower Eden, which is called ‘lower Wisdom,’ and between which and the higher Eden there is a difference as between darkness and light.”<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, the *Zohar* stresses the interrelated nature of the Upper and Lower Paradise, so that on the Sabbath, souls are permitted to rise from the Lower to the Upper Paradise to stand before the Throne of Glory. Eventually, the soul in the Lower Garden of Eden may be deemed worthy to rise to the celestial level of the Upper Garden, where it again receives new raiment.

The soul’s garments are made out of the good deeds performed by her in this world—in obedience to the commands of the Torah. While in the Lower Paradise, the soul is sustained by these deeds—even clad in garments that are made out of them! So says the *Zohar*. But when the soul progresses through purification and the grace of the Almighty, other precious garments are provided of a more exalted order. This dress is fashioned from the enthusiasm and devotion that characterized the soul’s study of the Torah and its most sincere prayers. On the highest level, in fact, garments of light are made for the soul in order to ascend on high. The former garments, as already noted, depend on the soul’s actions in

the world of three dimensions, but the higher garments depend on devotion and love, which qualify their owner to join the company of angels and divinely inspired spirits.<sup>39</sup>

#### UPPER PARADISE

In order to enter the Upper Garden of Eden, still one more trial of purification awaits the soul before it can stand before the "Sovereign of the Universe."

While in the Lower Paradise, the soul still has remnants of the mundane world in its consciousness, and this needs to be fully purged before it is fit to ascend on high. For this reason, the *Zohar* tells us, the soul passes through a "river of fire," after which it will emerge thoroughly purified. In this way, it comes into the presence of the Ultimate Sovereign, purified of all material conceptions and pollutants. According to these same Kabbalistic texts, there are also rays of celestial light, which further adds to the souls' healing. Since this is the ultimate stage of purification, the souls then stand garbed in their appropriate raiment before their Maker, and they know unending bliss.<sup>40</sup>

At this point in the *Zohar* we learn that the highest level of all is that of Tzror Hachayim, "the bundle of the living." It is literally the return of the soul to its preincarnation source. It is here that the soul encounters "that holy superior grade called the super-soul (*neshamah*), and it regales itself with supernal delights."<sup>41</sup> This is when the spirit ascends and basks in its association with the super-soul.

#### A NOTE ON REINCARNATION

According to the *Zohar*, Tzror Hachayim, as mentioned here, would seem to be the place or dimension in which souls finally complete their post-life journey, now purified, and worthy of dwelling in the highest reaches of the Upper Garden of Eden—figuratively, in the King's Palace itself. However, rather than a place of eternal rest, it seems clear that Tzror Hachayim is the final place of preparation for the soul's future incarnation.

This is clear from even a cursory reading of the *Zohar*, which tells us that all souls must undergo transmigration: they incarnate in bodily form repeatedly, until they learn their lessons and purify their consciousness. As the texts say, "Many are the worlds through which they [the souls] revolve, and each revolution is wondrous in many hidden ways. But men neither know nor are they able to perceive these things! Nor do they know how the souls roll about 'like a stone inside a sling' (I Sam. XXV, 29)."<sup>42</sup>

Based on this statement—and similar ones—from the *Zohar*, we learn that reincarnation occurs numerous times to all souls, for it is an integral part of the very process into which souls are brought forth and in which

We see then that the doctrine of reincarnation is not in opposition to the doctrine of resurrection, but, rather, is the expression of the Kabbalists' understanding of how resurrection and the Messianic era are to be achieved, through the constant elevation of the spiritual and the material through soul reincarnation.

When combined with the Arizal's teachings concerning the journey of the soul while in life in this world, a complete scenario is developed concerning the purpose of spiritual life both in this world and the next and their intimate and necessary relationship with each other. From the Jewish mystical perspective, then, we were created for the work of the soul, both in this world and in the next. This is the most basic meaning and purpose of both life and death.

#### NOTES

1. See *Zohar* II, 218b. All references to the *Zohar* can be corroborated with reference to Harry Sperlin and Maurice Simon, trans., *The Zohar*, vol. 1-5. London-New York: Soncino Press, 1984.

2. *Zohar* II, 217b.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Zohar* II, 245a.

5. *Zohar* V, 126b-127a.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Zohar* II, 218b.

12. *Zohar* I, 57b.

13. *Zohar* V, 53a.

14. *Zohar* I, 100a.

15. *Zohar* II, 218a-218b.

16. *Zohar* IV, 199a.

17. *Zohar* I, 221b.

18. *Zohar* I, 78b-79a.

19. *Zohar* IV, 126b.

20. *Zohar* II, 202a.

21. *Zohar* II, 175b.

22. See *Midrash* on Psalms 11:6.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Zohar* I, 218b-219a.

25. *Zohar* III, 142a.

26. *Zohar* I, 77a-77b.

27. *Zohar* II, 217b.

28. *Zohar* I, 65b-66a.

29. *Zohar* IV, 150a.

30. *Ibid.*



31. *Zohar* III, 97a.
32. *Zohar* II, 238b.
33. *Zohar* I, 107b–108a.
34. *Zohar* V, 53a.
35. *Zohar* IV, 211b.
36. *Zohar* IV, 150b–151a.
37. *Zohar* IV, 229b.
38. *Zohar* V, 182b.
39. *Zohar* IV, 210a–210b.
40. *Zohar* IV, 211b–212.
41. *Zohar* V, 71a.
42. *Zohar* III, 99b.
43. *Tikkunei Zohar*, 70, 132a.
44. *Ibid.*
45. See “The Jewish Concept of Reincarnation,” *Shaar Hagilgulim*, 89–91.
46. *Zohar* V, 182a–182b.
47. See “The Jewish Concept of Reincarnation,” *Shaar Hagilgulim*, 113–14.
48. *Ibid.*, 45.
49. *Zohar* II, 131a.

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