

Life After Death
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Yizkor Service
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“What happens to us after we die?”

That was the question that Alice asked her rabbi, Morris Adler, when Alice was a student in the religious school of Shaarei Tzedek synagogue in Detroit.

Rabbi Adler's response? “We have very few reports.”

That answer seemed to satisfy Alice then. But her question remains a question that has been asked since ancient times right up to the present.

Every year we see books written on the topic of the afterlife. As a typical example, consider the recent book by Dr. Eben Alexander. It's called Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the Afterlife.

Dr. Alexander, a prominent neurosurgeon, had heard stories of patients having near death experiences and visions of heaven. He considered these accounts to be the work of fevered minds.

Then Dr. Alexander himself became deathly ill. He fell into a coma that lasted seven days. His physicians were giving up hope. But he regained consciousness. What he told his colleagues startled them. He recounted meeting an angel who led him through heaven. His book, which I have not read, is reported to be surprisingly convincing.

One thing is certain: this book has been popular. It has been on the New York Times best seller list for 88 weeks.

Dr. Alexander wrote a second book, also a best seller, called Map of Heaven, elaborating on his report. He has appeared on numerous television shows, including Oprah. It is now Dr. Alexander's mission to convince the world that personal consciousness is not limited to our living brains. He claims that we continue to experience our consciousness after we die.

Dr. Alexander does have critics. To me the most persuasive is Dr. Oliver Sacks, former professor of neurology and psychiatry at Columbia and a prolific author. Dr. Sacks says the following:

To deny the possibility of any natural explanation for a near death experience, as Dr. Alexander does, is more than unscientific – it is antiscientific. . . .

The one most plausible hypothesis in Dr. Alexander's case, Dr. Sacks goes on, is that his near death experience occurred not during his coma, but as he was surfacing from the coma and his cortex was returning to full function. It is curious that he does not allow this obvious and natural explanation, but instead insists on a supernatural one.

Whether we continue in fact to live in some form after we die is a mystery we will not solve while we are alive. There will be reports of the afterlife and scientific explanations of those reports.

One question, though, we can answer with clarity. That question is, "What have our sources in Judaism taught on this topic?"

The best book that addresses the question is one by theologian Neal Gillman. It's called [The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought](#). Professor Gillman makes a persuasive case that belief in the immortality of our souls has been central to Judaism for the last two thousand years.

This idea often surprises Jews. We understand that life after death is a Christian belief, and we have come to learn that it is also a belief held by many Muslims. But what is the evidence for this being a belief in Judaism?

Actually, the evidence is pretty much everywhere you look. I will mention just two sources out of many.

First is the primary prayer in our liturgy, the weekday Amidah. The belief in life after death appears no less than six times in that prayer.

In the third paragraph of the Amidah, we read, "Atah gibor Polam Adonai, m'chayei meitim." One translation says, "Your might, O Lord, is boundless. You give life to the dead."

That idea of restoring the dead to life appears five more times in that one prayer: four times in the following paragraph, and then again in the final berakhah: "Baruch Atah Adonai, m'chayei ha'meitim."

These are not figures of speech. These words do not simply suggest that God gives us energy when we are weary. These prayers literally mean that when we die, God restores us to life in the world beyond this world.

This belief was a central issue in the battle in the first and second centuries between the Pharisees and the Sadducees in ancient Judea. The Pharisees believed in an immortal soul and life after death. The Sadducees denied that belief. The Pharisees prevailed. Not only that, but they also insisted on including this article of faith in our central prayer so that there would be no doubt that this belief was part of the emerging religion of rabbinic Judaism, the same religion we follow today.

Here is a second proof that Judaism believes in the afterlife. Consider the prayer El Malei Rachamim. We hear this prayer chanted at every Jewish funeral. In many synagogues, including ours, the prayer is also chanted during the Torah service after we read the list of our dear departed. Here is a translation El Malei Rachamim:

O God, full of compassion, Who dwells on high, grant true rest upon the wings of the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, in the exalted spheres of the holy and pure who shine as the resplendence of the firmament, to the souls of our dear departed, who have gone to the eternal world. May their place of rest be in Paradise, in the Garden of Eden. Therefore, may the All-Merciful One shelter them with the cover of His wings forever, and bind their souls in the bond of life. The Lord is their heritage; may they rest in their resting-places in peace; and let us say: Amen.

Today, the final day of the Pesach holiday, we hold our Yizkor memorial service. That service includes the following passage, at page 517 of Siddur Sim Shalom:

When I stray from you, O Lord, my life is as death;
but when I cleave to You, even in death I have life

You embrace the souls of the living and the dead.

The earth inherits that which perishes.

The dust returns to dust;
but the soul, which is God's, is immortal.

The Lord has compassion for His creatures.

He has planted eternity within our soul,
granting us a share in His unending life.

He redeems our life from the grave.