

Chapter Seven: A Case Study in Mourning: Jewish Religion

As the previous chapter noted, Jewish religion presents the most detailed instructions on the process of mourning. Even though the practices have been modified by modern Jews, the rituals remain distinctive and impressive. This chapter is about the tradition, the origin and some of the changes in the burial and mourning practices of Judaism. However, it is not possible to record all the variations in contemporary Jewish practice.

One must first emphasize that Judaism is centered on life not death. As I will presently elaborate, death does not have the dominant role in Judaism that it did in some of its neighboring religions in antiquity, such as Egyptian and Babylonian religion, or in Christianity which is so focused on the death of Jesus. Jewish development of elaborate rituals for death, burial and mourning may therefore seem paradoxical. Perhaps when dying is kept in perspective, when it does not become a dominant obsession which blocks ordinary life, then a community has rituals that remind the mourners how to move back from ordinary life and then, step by step, how to rejoin the community.

Whatever the origin of Jewish death and mourning rituals, they are powerful examples of many of the principles discussed in the preceding chapter. Three of these principles can be immediately noted. First, the entire process of dying, burial and mourning is not confined to the private sphere; but neither is it a splashy public affair. The rituals of community life allow a controlled personal expression of anger, guilt, grief and hope.

Second, the process that begins at death and ends a year later is laid out in precise stages. Maurice Lamm, in *The Jewish Way of Death and Mourning*, names five stages.¹ Although the journey might be divided in a slightly different way, what is clear is that markers exist for the mourner.

Third, the process of mourning comes to an end. Jewish tradition provided a period of a year for mourning one's parents. The same length seems appropriate for other major losses. In the early centuries of the common era, a second burial often marked the year's anniversary. Today the unveiling of a memorial or tombstone may take the place of this second burial.

This chapter is written for non-Jews who are not likely to know much about Jewish practices. Some contemporary Jews may not be aware of some of these practices or may not have reflected much on their significance. The origin of these practices was undoubtedly religious. The purpose was not meeting

psychological needs. (Mourning as discussed in rabbinic tradition was an *obligation* not a need). Nonetheless, one can still take account of the psychological relevance of such rituals.

Is there something that both Jew and Gentile could learn from these traditional rituals? Geoffrey Gorer, in *Death, Grief and Mourning*, concluded that Orthodox Jews were one of the few groups in England and the United States that had an adequate form of mourning. Gorer proposed at the end of his study the need for a secular ritual that might fill the role that religious rituals of mourning once had.ⁱⁱ Such a project may or may not be possible without an underlying belief system that the ritual reflects.

Jewish rituals concerned with death implied a view of an afterlife, or what is usually called *the world-to-come*. Archeological data from tombs, together with liturgical prayers for the dead and the mourners, are the main sources for understanding Jewish belief in a life after death. Jewish tradition is skimpy on speculation about an afterlife. In this regard it is closer to Buddhism than to Christianity.

Neither Jewish nor Buddhist religions deny the reality of a life after death. They are simply skeptical that we can know one way or another, and speculation may distract us from attending to the life we do have. The Talmud says *It were better for the man never to be born who thinks about four things: what is above and what is below, what was before and what will be afterward.*ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, philosophically, Jewish tradition could be called *Agnostic* (Not know) about an afterlife. But in community practices there was implied a survival of the dead and a journey of the dead to a final form of existence.

The question of an afterlife is not the focus of the Bible and Talmud. According to them, the best way to deal with death is to live life in its fullness. Summing up the Talmudic comparison of the living and the dead, David Kraemer writes: *The assertion of the ultimate indispensability of the flesh...characterizes rabbinic Judaism more fundamentally than perhaps any other belief.*^{iv} A world-to-come is not a spiritual world which is imagined to be a second story on the existing world. It is, rather, a world that can only emerge from the end of time in *this world*.

A favorite comparison in the Talmud is between death and weddings. When a funeral and a wedding conflict, the corpse must yield; life takes precedence over death. More generally, however, death and weddings are compared for their similarity. One should make preparation for death just as one prepares for a

wedding, remembering to bring the ring.^v The world as a whole is compared to a wedding. Ultimately the partners to the wedding die - but the seed of life grows and death is conquered for the seed of the future carries the germ of the past.^{vi}

During the process of mourning, as is the case in the rest of life, Jewish law requires that we take care of ourselves. Thus, diet, exercise, sleep, hygiene, avoidance of injury are owed to the self.^{vii} It is particularly important that mourning, which is a kind of dying for the living, be carefully circumscribed. Taking the example of David in 2Sam. 12:22-23 - life goes on despite the devastating loss of his child - Jewish tradition provides care for the mourner and an eventual end to mourning. The practices described in the following sections are a determined affirmation of life by means of a realistic acknowledgment of death's limited control over an individual's life.

From Death to Burial

The first stage of the journey begins at death and ends at burial. There is a strict separation between the period preceding burial (*aninut*) and the period afterward (*avelut*). In the first period, all of the attention is on the needs and honor of the deceased. Only with burial does the focus turn to the survivors who at that point become mourners.^{viii} The protocol for preparation of the dead body was quite consistent in rabbinic times (the second to sixth centuries C.E.). Some of the practices have been modified but much of the ritual survives to this day.^{ix}

The dying person is encouraged to recite the *Viddui*, a final confession of faults. God is asked to forgive the dying person's sins and to protect the surviving family. The prayer ends with an affirmation of faith in God. There is a kind of acceptance implied both for the dying person and the family: *May it be thy will to heal me. But if death is my lot, then I accept it from thy hand with love.* The first words spoken at the moment of death are *Blessed is the truthful judge.*^x

The dying person should not be left alone but there should be no grasping when the time for death has come. Foreshadowing contemporary hospice practice, the medieval *Sefer Hasidim* says that the dying person should not be compelled to eat if he or she cannot swallow.^{xi} The attending community is not to pray for extending life when the death throes are evident. The Talmud tells a story of a Rabbi Josua who lay dying. His disciples in the next room were praying for his recovery. A pious maid stopped them, saying *For what are you praying? You are praying for his agony. He is with God, let him go.* The Talmud praises the maid.^{xii}

The Acceptance that is encouraged is not based on any romantic or sentimental idea of death. The law (*halakhah*) does not gloss over the sorrowful and ugly aspects of death. It places careful restrictions on behavior immediately following death, a time of great emotion. The ritual tearing of a garment (*keriah*) was originally done on hearing of the death of a loved one. The ritual is now usually performed at the time of burial. The anger and sorrow implied by the gesture are reflected in the survivor's exemption from prayer obligations; one is allowed to feel a certain alienation from God. The *halakhah* has tolerated those crazy, torturing thoughts and doubts. It did not command the mourner to disown them as contradicting the basic *halakhic* doctrine of man's election as king of the universe.^{xiii}

The main focus is the dead body which is to be treated with honor, respect and dignity. The corpse is compared to a damaged Torah scroll which is no longer used but still deserves reverence.^{xiv} From the moment of death until the burial, the body is not to be left alone. The family and the community must arrange for watchers (*shomrin*), friends or relatives of the deceased.

In the past, the task of protecting the body and preparing it for burial fell to a group of esteemed members of the society called *Chevra Kadisha* (Holy society). They began their service to the person while he or she was dying, rotating their presence, offering prayers and listening to confession. After the death they were charged with purifying the body. That rite consisted mainly of washing (*taharah*); in ancient times the body was also anointed.

The improvement of the body is mostly spiritual, in the silent prayers which accompany each gesture. The actual view of the body is kept to a minimum. The body is present but concealed; the face must be obscured.^{xv} *Taharah* can be a name for the entire process of mourning; the whole gamut of emotions in the mourning process are signaled in the washing of the body, the prayers of forgiveness, praise and petition. The *Chevra Kadisha* is still found among some orthodox groups in the United States and in Israel.

After the body is washed, it is placed on straw in a simple wooden coffin. A shroud or sheet is sometimes used to cover the body. Embalming is not practiced and cremation was forbidden. The rationale is that the body is to decompose naturally. A return to the earth from whence human life comes is appropriate at the end of life. From the standpoint of Jewish tradition, much of contemporary funeral practice is unnatural, that is, an attempt to deny the reality of death. In the Jewish view, the dead body is shown respect by being placed in

the ground within a short time, surrounded by the simplest materials.^{xvi}

Burial

The standard time for burial is within twenty-four hours after death. However, exceptions are made if time for distant travel is needed. The burial is a simple ritual with a number of gestures specified by tradition, together with variety in what is said. The customary division of labor was to have the rabbi give the eulogy; mournful crying was by a hired chorus of women. Today the eulogy is often given by one of the mourners. Or the personal writings of the deceased might be read. A commonly used prayer for the beginning of the service is Psalm twenty-three: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures.*[@]

Weeping is a natural and healthy reaction to sorrow but *excessive weeping*[@] is thought to be unseemly. The *Shulhan Aruk*, one of the most important medieval document on death, says: *One should not grieve too much for the dead and whosoever grieves excessively is really grieving for someone else. The Torah has limits for every stage of grief, and we may not add to them: three for weeping, seven for lamenting, and thirty for abstaining from laundered garments and from cutting the hair - and no more.*^{@vii}

The three hallmarks of the burial service are the eulogy (*hesped*), the prayer of compassion (*El Malai Rakhamim*) and the great prayer of praise, the Kaddish.

The earliest example of the eulogy is found in the Talmud.^{xviii} The eulogy's main purpose is to honor the dead, but it is also used to evoke sorrow. It is not directly addressed to the deceased but concerns the life and accomplishments of the deceased. The earliest examples of the eulogy were often in poetry. In modern times, eulogizing takes on a more personal slant in that there is resistance to impersonal formulas used for referring to the dead.

The prayer of compassion, the *El Malai Rakhamim*, is recited after the body is lowered into the grave. It expresses our intense sense of separation. Heard many times before, it has a powerful newness with the name of the dead person included for the first time. The prayer expresses trust in the mercy and justice of God. In prayers for the dead, the mourner is reminded of the universal laws of creation and destruction. One's personal feelings are always placed in the context of trust in a compassionate God.

That attitude is especially manifest in the Kaddish, the central prayer in the

process. The ceremonial point at which *aninut* is transformed into *avelut*, despair into intelligent sadness, and self-negation into self-affirmation, is to be found in the recital of the Kaddish at the grave.^{ix} Although the term Kaddish is now strongly associated with mourning, the prayer did not originate there. Most forms of the Kaddish do not mention death. The prayer is essentially a gloria, a hymn of praise to God. It may have started as a liturgical corollary to pedagogical activity. That is suggested by the contrast between the Great Kaddish or the Rabbi's Kaddish and the Minor Kaddish for children. The Burial Kaddish adds a paragraph on the resurrection of the dead and the restoration of the temple.

The Kaddish both sanctifies God's name and urges a healing of the world (*tikkun olam*). As such, it is a prayer for messianic restoration and a hastening of the time when this world is identified with the world-to-come. The association of Kaddish with death is easy enough to understand. But it was only after the suffering of the Crusades that the Kaddish took on its special relation to both the ceremony of burial and the mourning period that follows when the Mourner's Kaddish is recited.

I noted earlier that the tearing of the garment (*keriah*) was originally done at the time of death but it is now usually done at the burial. It is a symbolic expression of the violent feelings that the death of a loved one can engender.^{xx} The garment is torn on the left side for a parent, on the right side for other relatives. The ritual takes its origin from Jacob in the Bible (Gen.37:34) who rent his garments upon hearing of the death of his son, Joseph. As the garment is torn to expose the heart, a prayer is said in praise of God the true judge. The torn garment is worn during the mourning period that follows. Jewish law permits the garment to be sewn back together. The tear in the garment remains as it does on the mourner's heart, the scar remaining as memory of the loss.

At a Jewish funeral the coffin is lowered into the ground while the mourners are still present. It would be considered an affront to leave the body unburied.^{xxi} That moment can be especially painful but this completion of burial is part of the realistic attitude toward death. The act of covering the coffin with dirt is performed by the mourners. Each one takes up a shovel and tosses some dirt into the grave. The shovel is not handed from one person to the next. Each one takes up the shovel - on the basis that misery should not be handed around.^{xxii}

The ritual near the end of the burial ceremony, as people are getting ready to leave, is to pass through a line that is composed of the mourners. All who are present, except for the immediate family, form parallel lines a few feet apart. The mourners slowly pass through. They pause a number of times as those present

say in unison, *May you be comforted among the mourners of Jerusalem and Zion.* This ritual manages well the exiting from the grave site, neither an unhealthy lingering nor an unseemly quick departure.

A final gesture on leaving the cemetery is to pluck a few blades of grass and throw it over the shoulder. The act conveys a pivoting from the *needs* of the deceased to the needs of the mourner. The work at the cemetery is complete, but the cycle of mourning is just beginning.

After leaving the cemetery or at the beginning of shiva there is a ritual washing of hands. This is a very ancient rite that continues to be practiced in some communities today. Those whose lives have been touched by death are considered to be *impure*. It is interesting that by the middle ages this ritual was already questioned. The community leaders (*geonim*) disagreed among themselves about this rite of washing. It seems, however, that attempts to suppress the rite were unsuccessful.^{xxiii}

This acknowledgment points up the fact that popular traditions often differ from the rules and interpretations enjoined by community leaders. Funeral practices are perhaps the most difficult rituals to change. Some of these Jewish practices (and similarly Christian practices) may have pagan origins but became embedded in popular piety. Community leaders can either fight against the practice or absorb it into the tradition with a reinterpretation of its meaning.

Shiva

Many non-Jews are familiar with the term shiva. It is simply the word for seven but its meaning is tied to the first week of mourning after the funeral. The seven days are an inversion of God's work of creation insofar as shiva begins with death. Reform Judaism has shortened the observance of shiva to three days, based on the application of a law that permits abbreviations.^{xxiv} In the more traditional observance, the first three days are the most intense when there is a total cessation from ordinary business. All of the peculiar small rituals during the seven days are designed to set up a protective barrier and encourage quiet reflection on the part of the mourners. The mourner is to live as if dead in a space between the defiled land of death and the land of sanctity and life.^{xxv}

The mourners return from the funeral to the *house* of mourning. A candle is lit which will burn for the next seven days. During the week, the synagogue moves into the house. A meal is prepared by friends in the community. This *meal of consolation* is symbolically important and it is also a practical need.

What better way to show care than to provide food for someone whose attention is not on getting a meal.

Shiva is a time of silences. Those who visit the mourner are not to offer customary greetings. The mourner speaks first, or has the option of remaining silent. This rule removes the awkwardness of *What do I say?* Physical presence speaks volumes. When people leave, they can rely on a prayer formula: *May you be comforted among the mourners of Jerusalem and Zion.*

Many of the practices of shiva are concerned with a person's physical appearance and ordinary comforts of life. Thus, hair is not cut, clothes are not washed, leather shoes are not worn. The mourner is confined to a world of quiet grief. Pleasure in life is restricted; sorrow is thought to bring atonement for possible failures by the deceased and insensitivity on the part of mourners.

Two of the distinctive rituals of shiva are the covering of mirrors and sitting on low stools. The covered mirrors fit within the theme of letting one's physical appearance move off the screen of social acceptance. In ancient times, the ritual may have been tied to the blocking of evil spirits from intruding on the gathering.

Sitting on a low chair or stool is apparently inspired by the Book of Job. Job's friends came and sat with him *to the earth.* The symbolism here seems clear, nearness to the earth where the deceased has been placed. Our word *humility* derives from the same word as does earth. The Book of Job calls for acknowledgment and acceptance of God's mysterious ways; humans are creatures born of the earth. *They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant and then it's dark once more.*^{xvi}

When shiva is over, the end is marked by doing some action that has been forbidden during the previous week. An example is the hammering of a nail into wood. The loud rap of the hammer awakens the mourner to the next stage of the journey. Like ripping a garment, hammering a nail gives physical expression to pent up feelings. During the time of mourning, withdrawal into one's soul is needed but not so much as to be cut off from the community that is supportive of the mourner.

Shiva, the centerpiece of the process of Jewish mourning, is well structured to allow both withdrawal for the mourner and a protective care for the community. The ritual was not designed for psychological well-being but it serves that end quite well. With reference to mourning and much else in the culture, there is a great resistance to judging actions as good or bad. To the extent that this attitude

reflects an unwillingness to judge people's subjective guilt, the change may be for the better. But human beings are properly judgmental about whether an activity is health giving or destructive.

In *Mourning and Mitzvah*, author Ann Brener says, "As with all the questions that mourners ask, there are no right or wrong answers. Mourning is a necessary form of regression. We do what we do because we need to do it. The behavior of mourning should not be judged."^{xxvii} That is a strange conclusion to draw while detailing the right and proper rituals of mourning.

Sometimes there are right answers and certainly there are sometimes wrong answers. In the next paragraph, Brener writes "Nevertheless, some behavior does raise red flags. We need to be on the lookout for behavior that is destructive in a way that might have long term effects."^{xxviii} She cites as examples reliance on drugs and alcohol, and abusive behavior to others. So it turns out that the behavior of mourning can be judged in a way that proscribes abuse of oneself or others, even while there is allowance of personal variations within an accepted range of behavior.

Shiva to the First Year Anniversary

Following the seven days of shiva the next stage of mourning is the period up to thirty days after the death (*sheloshim*). The period of mourning may then continue beyond that time up to a year. In earlier times the period of mourning for a year was only to be for one's parents. However, it would be apparent to most people today that a longer period than a month is needed for one's child, or spouse, or intimate friend. Jewish tradition had the ritual in place for parents and had only to extend the application of the ritual to other family members and close friends.

Whatever the length of mourning, it is not just a stringing out of the same feelings. The passage of time has markers to help the grieving party be slowly reintegrated into the life of the community. Particularly in the first thirty days, there is a transition at each Sabbath. Bit by bit the mourner moves in four stages back into an ordinary role in the congregation.^{xxix}

The central activity during these thirty days is the saying of the mourner's Kaddish three times daily. The prayer is not said alone but only in the presence of a quorum of ten people (*minyan*). Such a practice requires a deep commitment of time and attention. Leon Weltsier's moving book, entitled *Kaddish* is the story of his doubts, struggles and success at praying for his father during

the year after his father's death. Not everyone is in a position to carry out this practice fully. Those who cannot attend the prayer service may make a donation to a Talmudic academy or a nursing home. The recitation there of the Kaddish is judged to be equal to recitation by the mourner.

The original impetus of the mourner's Kaddish praising God was words spoken by the dead person's son. Quite appropriately, it is also called the orphan's Kaddish. It implies a hope that God would alleviate the suffering of the dead person. Although the prayer was to be said for a year, the time was usually shortened to eleven months. This abbreviating was a sign of confidence in God and a trust in the goodness of one's parents.

During the year of prescribed mourning, a friend may offer words of condolence, but not inquire about the mourner's well being. After the year, he or she can ask, "How are you," but not offer direct condolence on the death of a loved one. Mourning is suspended for Shabbat and for certain holidays. The obligation of rejoicing with the community takes precedence over the obligation to mourn.^{xxx} On Shabbat, said Rabbi Gamliel, "It is as if a mourner is not a mourner."^{xxxi}

The year of mourning is circumscribed by the one year anniversary (*Yahrzeit*) and a quarterly remembrance in a prayer called *Yizkor*. This latter prayer is a request made to God to remember the deceased. The petitioner joins in partnership with God to keep an awareness of the person who has died. The *Yizkor* is said in conjunction with the seasonal feasts that mark the Jewish calendar. A change of feelings accompanies each season's beginning. At Passover (*Pesach*) the feeling is one of being released from sorrow. And at Shavuot, seven weeks later, there are positive statements about the deceased and a rededication to activities in memory of the deceased.^{xxxii}

Near the end of the first year, there is an unveiling of a tombstone or memorial. The event is like a second funeral but without the intense grief. The same prayers are said as at the (first) funeral: the eulogy (*hesped*), the prayer of compassion (*El Makai Rakhamim*) and the Kaddish. This event helps to bring the period of bereavement to its close. In subsequent visits to the cemetery, the mourners place pebbles on the grave.^{xxxiii}

A second funeral or reburial marked the conclusion of the journey and final rest for the deceased. Where secondary treatment occurs, the fate of the corpse is a model for the fate of the nonmaterial component of the person....Dying is a slow process of transition from one spiritual state to another.^{xxxiv} At least in ancient

times, Jews participated in this way of thinking and in the practice of reburial. Archeological findings indicate that the practice was common in the environs of Jerusalem before 70 C.E.

The Talmud notes that reburial is not an occasion for formal mourning or wailing. Instead, the survivors should say words of praise to God.^{xxxv} Apparently the practice fell into disuse after the middle of the fourth century but rabbinic sources continue to discuss it as if it were still practiced. Medieval commentators on the matter says that some people practice reburial and it is not to be condemned. In fact, reburial in the land of Israel is praised, although it is unclear whether that actually happened.^{xxxvi}

The final ritual in the year of mourning is on the anniversary of the death. *Yahrzeit* marks the fact of a complete cycle of the year. The day begins with the lighting of the candle at sunset in a private experience of mourning. The day is one of sadness in recollecting the dead. It is also a day of joy and liberation. In earlier times there was fasting to show solidarity with the dead and the need for expiation. Fasting has been transformed into self-denial through works of charity. There is a rededication to actions for justice.^{xxxvii}

With the unveiling of the tombstone and the observance of *Yahrzeit*, the process of mourning comes to a close. Commenting on this observance, Ann Brener writes: *But the truth is that few people ever feel completely finished with mourning. Some feeling and issues may always remain.*^{xxxviii} If one employs the distinctions set out at the beginning of chapter six, *Feelings and issues* are not the same as a process of mourning or a period of bereavement.

When one has suffered the loss of a parent, spouse, child, or close friend, the world will never be the same again. But mourning should have an end, both out of respect for the dead and for the health of survivors. No doubt there are cases where the period of mourning needs to go on for more than a year. But the community ritual remains a guide for an individual person.

The term *Acceptance* can once again be helpful for expressing an attitude that realistically puts dying into the context of life. Brener strikes the right note here in saying that acceptance means finding a way to feel some harmony and continuous partnership with the deceased as well as a renewed harmony with a universe that permits loss.^{xxxix} Without some formed ritual for mourning, it is difficult to see how someone can move through the complex of feelings surrounding death to find a reintegration of the living and the dead.

Jewish rituals for death, burial and mourning offer comfort to the survivors at every step along the way. The rituals may work better because they were *not* designed to aim at comfort. Comfort, like joy, is a side effect that cannot be eagerly sought. Both of them come unexpectedly to those who do the right and proper thing. Deborah Lipstadt, after recounting the ritual performed at the time of her father's death, writes: "Observance offered a measure of strength that I never dreamed it would. We did not observe in order to be strengthened, but as we observed we were strengthened."¹

Does the ritual work for a thoroughly secularized Jew who has no firm religious beliefs? Perhaps not, although the traditions of centuries are not likely to disappear entirely from the lives of Jews today. The rationalizing of the Jewish religion from the seventeenth-century to today is a continuing crisis of Jewish life. The Holocaust gave a new dimension to that crisis, adding the impact of emotions that defy description. Can a Jew still believe in the Blessed One of Israel after the science, sufferings and wars of modern times?

No one has an infallible gauge of Jewish belief today. It should be kept in mind that belief or a system of beliefs has never been the central category of Jewish religion. The ancient rabbis and the medieval commentators were already aware of the great diversity of beliefs, opinions and viewpoints in the Jewish community. Religion, especially Jewish religion, survives on the basis of its rituals. "The power of religion depends...upon the credibility of the banners it put in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably toward it."² A Jew once asked his rabbi what to do about the fact that he no longer believed in God. The rabbi's answer was "Pray to God about that."³ The answer may be naive but it captures something striking about Jewish belief.

Implied Beliefs about Afterlife

This chapter is mainly concerned with Jewish rituals and their wisdom, given what we know about grief work.⁴ All of these detailed practices originated not from psychological studies but from religious beliefs. More often than not, the beliefs were implied or assumed. Judaism has no system of doctrines that would be similar to Christianity's. Jewish tradition has layers that have been built up during more than three millennia. Within any particular layer there are a diversity of voices. That was true even in the biblical era. Thus, one proceeds with caution in making any generalizations about Jewish views on an afterlife.

Because Jewish tradition has not elaborated a set of doctrinal beliefs, an historian must usually infer belief from liturgical practices. Sometimes the ancient

commentators spelled out the implication. More often, the rituals continued to be performed even when the belief was seemingly left behind. One could posit a dialectical relation between belief and ritual; that is, a ritual expresses belief but belief might be stimulated by ritual. Judaism does not deny belief about an afterlife; it is simply reticent about how to formulate any belief.

To the extent, therefore, that Jewish views of the afterlife are inferable, one finds all three of the main views of afterlife survival: resurrection of the body, immortality of the soul, and reincarnation. The first view, resurrection of the body, is the most dominant in history, even though some contemporary Jews might think it is a Christian doctrine.

From the very time of its adoption in Judaism, resurrection was accompanied by belief in an immortal soul. Medieval commentators often tried to hold on to both views. Their philosophical bent was toward the immortality of the soul but they did not wish to reject the traditional belief in resurrection. That dilemma is especially striking in the greatest of the philosophers, Maimonides.^{xlii}

Reincarnation did not emerge until medieval mysticism, when it became a central tenet. Reincarnation can include belief in the survival of the soul but it is not easily compatible with resurrection, a fact that did not stop some mystics from holding both.^{xliii}

While this variety of beliefs may suggest the lack of any consensus, the most important conclusion is that from the late part of the biblical era until the twentieth century Jews did hold some version of life in the Aworld-to-come.[@] That attitude began to change in the eighteenth century but it was only in the twentieth century that it would generally be said that Jews did not believe in an afterlife.^{xliv}

A Jew who subscribes to the Bible as the word of God might argue that belief in an individual life beyond death has little or no basis in the Bible. The more telling reason for doubt about an afterlife is the strong influence of modern rationalism that affected Judaism. This philosophical outlook disparaged the tradition of resurrection.^{xlv} Even so, the burial and mourning practices still reflect belief in after-death survival. For example, as noted earlier, the Kaddish for one's parents is said for eleven months rather than a year because of confidence in the parent-s goodness. There is obviously implied some system of expiation for the faults of a dead person.^{xlvi}

In the early part of the Bible there is merely a suggestion of a collective survival. The patriarch, Jacob, asks to be buried with his people. The dead

seem to have a parallel society to the living.^{xlvii} The Bible has a long history of an underground place called Sheol. It starts out as an amoral gathering of the dead (the *rephaim*) outside of God's power.^{xlviii} Eventually it becomes an elaborately structured place where the wicked receive their just punishments and the good await the final judgment.

The idea of individual judgment and reward begins to emerge after the Exile. The books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah suggest punishment for evil doers and riches for the righteous.^{xlix} The book of Job raises a problem with that pattern and Job's struggle still echoes today. Why do the good seem to do most of the suffering? The book of Job has been subjected to endless interpretations; its message remains ambiguous. The book does suggest an accounting at the end of life when the balance will be righted. "And after my skin has been destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God."^l

The belief in resurrection arose in the last two centuries before the common era. It is implied in a few late biblical texts, especially Isaiah and Daniel: "Those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."^l Resurrection is a central theme in the literature known as the Apocrypha, texts that were not accepted into the canon but were well known to the rabbis responsible for the compilation of the Talmud.

The idea of resurrection is mythical, which is not to say it is false. The human race did not have to wait until the twentieth century to discover that a literal resurrection is impossible to imagine. Ancient people were well aware that the dead person was not going to stand up in the tomb and walk out.

The language of resurrection implies two things: first, humans participate in a renewal similar to the earth's yearly cycle. The dead of winter is followed by the rebirth of springtime. Jewish prayer life, including the *Yizkor*, is tied to the cycle of seasons. Resurrection is a statement about the cosmos and about the human's place at the center of living beings.

Second, an afterlife is somehow in continuity with the fleshly life of humans; the body is the basis of eternal life; it is not the enemy. Jewish attitudes and prayers endorse a fullness of bodily life with its pleasures. On the last day a man will have to give an account concerning everything in which his eye delighted but the enjoyment of which he nevertheless denied himself.^{ll}

Resurrection carried a third connection in Jewish history. This belief probably came through Zoroastrian religion and other religious movements of the time that

sharply divided the world into good and evil. History was seen to be in crisis and the end was thought to be near. In the Book of Daniel and in 2Maccabees, the idea of an endtime was linked to belief that God would send his Anointed one or messiah to restore Israel and begin an era of peace. Resurrection would be of the nation in the time of the messiah. A group of reformers called the Pharisees put the pieces together: God would save both the individual and the nation; the dead would rise on the last day to be judged by God's anointed.

Resurrection did not immediately carry the day. Another group, the Sadducees, were identified as not believing in the resurrection. However, by the second century C.E, the Sadducees seemed to have faded. The Rabbis were the successors of the Pharisees and led the community after the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. They confirmed the belief in bodily resurrection at the Council of Jamnia in 90 C. E.

The rabbis gathered together the documents that became known as the Talmud. These writings are diverse. Nonetheless, if there was any one canonized dogma of rabbinic Judaism, it was the belief that there would be a collective resurrection at the end-of-days.^{lii} The central prayer of benediction (*Amidah*) from the first century affirms a belief in resurrection six times. Neil Gillman suggests that affirming a belief six times is evidence that the doctrine was in doubt or disputed.^{liv} Even when resurrection won out, the repetition of belief in resurrection continued.

The tension over the nature of afterlife in rabbinic times is caught in one passage by Rabbi Jacob: *A*This world is called an antechamber to the world-to-come; one must prepare to enter the banquet hall....Better is one hour of equanimity in the world-to-come than the whole of life in this world.^{lv} Yet in the very same place the author can say: *B*Better is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than the whole of the life in the world-to-come.^{lvi} In theoretical terms, the two statements seem to contradict one another and yet preference is not given to either. On the practical side, the concern is ethically centered: do what is best in this life and do not speculate about the next.

The rabbis believed that the body of the deceased continued to maintain sensitivity for some time after death. *A*The atonement of a man for his sins starts from the moment he begins to feel the pains of the grave.^{lvii} Particularly during the first three days the soul is in close proximity to the body, trying to reenter it. The mourning ritual still reflects an intense concern with the first three days. With the decomposition of the body, the soul or spirit continues on its journey, still able to communicate with the humans and perhaps be their advocates in the heavenly

realm.^{lvii}

A question that naturally arose was the length of time that the wicked were punished. Although there are some references to eternal fire, Jewish tradition did not go that route. A fairly strong consensus said that the punishment of the wicked in Gehenna is twelve months.^{lviii} Medieval commentators worked out further differentiations for degrees of wickedness. Not everyone was so bad as to deserve the full year's punishment; but not everyone is perfect enough to enter paradise at death. The anniversary remembrance of *Yahrzeit* is based on this belief of a year's punishment or the anniversary is itself the basis of the belief.

Belief in resurrection in the land of Israel is reflected in inscriptions on tombs. During the third and fourth centuries of the common era, twenty-six catacombs at Beth Shearim (A House of Gates) were used for burial. Not only Jews in the holy land but other Jews in the diaspora, especially in Babylonia, are buried at this site. It constitutes strong evidence for a rite of reburial.^{lix} That is, Jews blended the common human practice of reburying the bones and belief in resurrection when the messiah comes. For Jews who could not be reburied in Israel, the practice developed of bringing a satchel of earth to the place of burial. To this day, dirt from the Mount of Olives is sprinkled on caskets. Whether or not contemporary Jews think of it this way, it is a profession of belief in the resurrection on the last day.

Medieval Jewish thought was deeply affected by Aristotelian philosophy; this influence created tensions with the earlier tradition. The philosophies of Plato and Aristotle had no problem with an immortal soul that could survive the death of the body. But philosophers found it difficult to make sense of resurrection.

A Soul is a Greek conception which is not found in the Bible. The Bible does have several terms that are translated as *Aspirit* (*nefesh, ruah, neshamah*). The medieval writers used these terms as aspects of the soul, corresponding to Aristotle's vegetative, animal and intellectual soul. Saadia Gaon (882-942) was the first of these philosophers followed by Maimonides, Gersonides and Nahmanides. Their reflections on different levels of the soul led to emphasis on intellectual knowledge as the basis of salvation. The goal is to achieve a high mind through study. The reward of the righteous is luminescent light.^{lx}

Along with a highly rational philosophy in the middle ages, Jewish philosophy included a strong mystical element. Between 1150 and 1220 the term *Kabbalah* (A to receive) came into use and became the way to describe Jewish mysticism from the twelfth century onward. Originally an oral teaching, the central text of

Kabbalah is the *Zohar*, a thirteenth-century commentary on the five books of Moses. Mysticism was disdained by many Jewish historians of the nineteenth century, such as Heinrich Graetz, but underwent a revival in the twentieth century with the work of Gershom Scholem^{lxi}

Kabbalah, while sometimes thought to be foreign to the tradition, actually picked up many different strands of biblical, rabbinic and post-rabbinic traditions. The *Zohar* refers to the three aspects of soul mentioned above: the *nefesh* remains in the grave, undergoing pain and judgment; the *ruah* is punished in Gehenna for up to twelve months; the *neshamah* enters the Garden of Eden.^{lxii} The language is developed from medieval philosophers but is compatible with rabbinic teaching.

The most distinctive teaching of Jewish mysticism is belief in reincarnation. The term that was used, *gilgul*, means wheel or revolution. Saadia Gaon in the tenth century had pronounced this belief nonsense and stupidities,[@] but by the twelfth century it had taken hold.^{lxiii} Reincarnation is certainly difficult to fuse with resurrection. The mystic attempt to do so placed resurrection in a subordinate position, a penultimate form of survival. The *Zohar* suggests not only a pure spirit but absorption into the divine.^{lxiv} Until that final state, both the wicked and the righteous undergo a succession of births and deaths. The righteous continue until they are perfect in carrying out all 613 commandments. They can also be of help to others as they achieve perfection, similar to the Bodhisattva figure in Buddhism.^{lxv}

Reincarnation may seem to be a strange belief for Judaism. It is a doctrine most often associated with Buddhism and Hinduism. Whether or not there were direct historical borrowings, there are echoes of Buddhism in rabbinic and medieval Jewish thought. Reincarnation has probably been the belief of most people in history. It is not surprising that it also emerged in Jewish (and Christian) history.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead recounts the journey of a soul for forty-nine days from death to reincarnation. The imagery in the book surely stems in part from what we now call near-death experiences.[@] The human race has always been interested in what happens at death and afterlife. The evidence is sketchy, to say the least, but humans have stubbornly believed, despite all contrary evidence, that something survives - a shade, a ghost, a spirit. Reincarnation puts a human face back in the picture. The doctrine occupies a subordinate position in Jewish history but it is important to recognize it as part of the tradition for Jews who engage in future religious dialogues.

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- i. Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York: Jonathan David, 1969), 78.
 - ii. Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning*,
 - iii. Quoted in Hannah Arendt, *Willing*, 72.
 - iv. David Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 112; Shabbat 151a-153a
 - v. Abraham Heschel "Death as Homecoming," in *Jewish Reflections on Death*, ed. Jack Riemer; (New York: Schocken Books, 1974),
 - vi. Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 238.
 - vii. Elliot Dorff "Assisted Death: A Jewish Perspective," in *Must We Suffer Our Way to Death?* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1996); Shabbat 32a
 - viii. Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Halakhah of the First Day," in *Jewish Reflection on Death*, 76
 - ix. David Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism*, 133.
 - x. Anne Brener, *Mourning and Mitzvah* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1993), 64
 - xi. Samuel Heilman, *When a Jew Dies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 15.
 - xii. Ibid.
 12. Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Halakhah of the First Day," in *Jewish Reflections on Death*, 77.
 - xiv. Talamud: Berakhot, 17b-19b.
 - xv. Samuel Heilman, *When a Jew Dies*, 76.
 - xvi. Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, xi.
 - xvii. "Shulhan Aruk" in *Jewish Reflections on Death*, chapter 394.
 - xviii. David Kraemer, *the Meaning of Death in Rabbinic Judaism*, 101-03.
 - xix. Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Halakhah of the First Day," in *Jewish Reflections on Death*, 79.
 - xx. Samuel Heilman, *When a Jew Dies*, 80

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- xxi. Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 64
- xxii. Samuel Heilman, *When a Jew Dies*, 112.
- xxiii. David Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism*, 138
- xxiv. Moed Katan, 156.
- xxv. Emanuel Feldman, *Death as Estrangement: The Halakhah of Mourning*, @in *Jewish Reflections on Death*, 88.
- xxvi. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), 57.
- xxvii. Anne Brener, *Mourning and Mitzvah*, 103.
- xxviii. Ibid.
- xxix. Samuel Heilman, *When a Jew Dies*, 91, 159; Moed Qatan 3:5, 82b.
- xxx. Moed Qatan, 14b-16a
- xxxi. Anne Brener *Mourning and Mitzvah*, 51.
- xxxii. The other two times for *Yizkor* are at Yom Kippur and Shemini Altzeret
- xxxiii. The origin of this practice is unclear. It probably echoes biblical times when a grave was marked by a pile of stones.
- xxxiv. David Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism*, 35, quoting Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 97.
- xxxv. David Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism*, 93.
- xxxvi. Ibid., 141.
- xxxvii. Samuel Heilman, *When a Jew Dies*, 194.
- xxxviii. Anne Brener *Mourning and Mitzvah*, 209.
- xxxix. Ibid., 233.
- xl. Deborah Lipstadt, *The Lord Was His*, @in *Jewish Reflections of Death*, 51.

xli. Peter Berger, *Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 51.

xlii. For a thorough treatment of Maimonides's ambiguity, Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 1997), 143-72.

xliii. Neil Gillman, *Death of Death*, , 173-75.

xliv. Elliot Dorf, *Assisted Death: A Jewish Perspective*, 156, cites a poll in the 1990s: 67% of Christians, 45% of people with no religious identity and 30% of Jews said they believed in life after death

xlvi. David Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism*, 148; this was especially true of Reform Judaism. The Pittsburgh platform of 1885 professes that *the soul of man is immortal*. See Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death*, 202.

xlvi. Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1994), 305; Rabinowicz, 75.

xlvi. Ibid., 45

xlvi. Ibid., 53.

xlix. Ezek: 11: 13-21; 36: 25-32

l. Job 19:26

li. Dan.12:2.

lii. P. Qiddushin IV, 12

liii. Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 156; see *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10.1; *Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin*, 90a-b.

liv. Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death*, 124.

lv. Avot 4:16-21; Jacob Petuchowski, *Our Masters Taught: Rabbinic Stories and Sayings*, (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 113.

lvi. Sanhedrin, 47b

lvii. Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 137; Taanit 16a.

lviii. Shabbat 33b

lix. Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 159; David Kraemer, *The Meanings of*

Death in Rabbinic Judaism, 51-63.

lx. Simcha Paul Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 241

lxi. Raphael citing Graetz.....; Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941); *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).

lxii. Simcha Paul Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 283

lxiii. Ibid., 314.

lxiv. Moshe Idel, *Kabbala*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 67.

lxv. Simcha Paul Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 318