

Judaism and the Soul: What Happens After We Die?

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Every once in a while a book comes along that touches your soul, changes your perspective on the world and challenges you to think about what you believe to be true.

When I read Alice Sebold's "The Lovely Bones", I was enthralled with her vision of heaven and the afterlife. It spoke to my desires and pushed my beliefs.

The Lovely Bones is the story of a 14-year old girl named Susie Salmon who was murdered. I wouldn't usually be interested in a book with this subject matter, but the perspective from which she tells the story is enchanting. The story of Susie's murder and how her family, friends and community continue after her death is all told by Susie as she watches from heaven.

From heaven Susie watches her family grieve and heal; she watches her murderer continue with his evil life; and she settles into her new existence in heaven. And, every once in a while, she enters the world of the living and watches, guides, beckons, and reassures. She tells us at one point:

"Almost everyone in heaven has someone on Earth they watch, a loved one, a friend, or even a stranger who was once kind, who offered warm food or a bright smile when one of us had needed it. And when I wasn't watching I could hear the others talking to those they loved on Earth: just as fruitlessly as me, I'm afraid. A one-sided cajoling and coaching of the young, a one-way loving and desiring of their mates, a single-sided card that could never be signed." (p.246)

There is one amazing scene where Susie falls back to earth, into the body of her classmate Ruth who intuitively experiences Susie's presence. She is with Ray Singh, the boy who had a crush on Susie but never had a chance to build a relationship because of Susie's murder. As Susie-in-Ruth's body lies with Ray she asks him:

--Do you ever think about the dead, Ray?

He blinked his eyes and looked at me.

--I'm in med school.

--I don't mean cadavers, or disease, or collapsed organs, I mean what Ruth talks about. I mean us.

--Sometimes I do, he said. I've always wondered.

--We're here you know, I said. All the time. You can talk to us and think about us. It doesn't have to be sad or scary. (p.309)

The story is so compelling, not only because it is beautifully written, but because it touches at one of the innermost desires of the heart—that our loved ones who have died remain with us in spirit, that their deaths did not end the life of their spirits, that our loved ones are not suffering...but watching us, coaching us, cheering us on...

“The Lovely Bones” is only one piece of a trend in popular culture that includes many books and TV shows that focus on angels, souls and the dead interacting with the living on Earth. Why are we so interested in the life of the soul and where our dead go? Why now, at this point in history? One answer is because we don’t want death to be the end—especially when it takes our loved ones...especially when death takes people too soon, too quickly, too young.

In a world filled with terrorism, war, the loss of innocent lives, the murder of children, the loss of young men and women fighting in America’s armed forces...In a world in which hope for peace and an end to bloodshed seem far off...any hope that lives cut short will continue elsewhere gives us comfort.

The world is so scary; we don’t want DEATH to be so scary.

And so we ask: What happens to my loved one after he dies? Do we Jews believe he has a life beyond this world? What do we Jews believe about life after death and a world beyond this world? Don’t we just believe that the body returns to the earth and that is that?!?! But, come on Rabbi...is that really all there is ?!

Many times I have found myself explaining life after death as the immortality that comes from memories. Our loved ones will be given eternal life if we maintain their memories, live out their values, continue their legacies.

Yet, as I have studied in preparation for this sermon, and as I have journeyed through life with families experiencing death, I find myself believing in more than just the eternity of memory. And Jewish tradition DOES offer more than this.

Jewish tradition teaches that we are each given a soul by god and that soul is immortal.

Our soul is called our neshamah, our ruah or our nefesh. It is the divine element of our being that survives the physical realm.

It is “an extension of God.” In the creation of the first human, the Torah tells us “God formed Adam out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the neshamah of life; and Adam thus became a living creature” (Gen 2:7). The image of our soul as breath helps us to understand its nature. It is intangible; it is the force of life; and it links us with the ultimate Source of creation.

We are taught in the Talmudic tractate Berachot:

As God fills the whole world, so also the soul fills the whole body. As God sees, but cannot be seen, so also the soul sees, but cannot be seen. As God nourishes the whole world, so also the soul nourishes the whole body. As God is pure, so also the soul is pure. As God dwells in the innermost part of the Universe, so also the soul dwells in the innermost part of the body. (BT Ber.10a)

In his book “Does the Soul Survive?” Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz traces the development of the concept of the soul throughout Jewish tradition. In the Torah there is no explicit distinction between the body and the soul. In Talmudic tradition multiple positions develop regarding the life of the body and the soul and whether the soul can live beyond the body. A strong position arises in the Talmud that the soul is a distinct entity that separates from the body at death and continues to enjoy an existence with God until the moment of resurrection when it rejoins the body

I bring you only one piece of Talmud that tries to understand how we live and how we die. Take it in this vein, rather than an attempt at science. In tractate Niddah we are taught:

There are three partners in a human being: The Holy One, the father and the mother. The father provides the white substance, out of which are formed the child’s bones, sinews and nails, the brain in his head and the white of his eye. His mother provides the red substance, out of which are formed the child’s skin, flesh, and hair, and the black of the eye. The Holy One implants in the child spirit, soul, beauty of countenance, eyesight, the capacity to hear, the capacity to speak, and the capacity to walk, as well as knowledge, understanding and intelligence. When one’s time to depart from the world approaches, the Holy One takes away His part and leaves to the father and mother the parts contributed by them.

Judaism teaches that we are each given a soul. That soul is a gift from God that enables us to live and praise God and when our time is up and our soul is taken from us, it returns to God and lives in the world beyond—*olam habah*.

Jewish tradition teaches that there IS life after death. The question is what kind of life. The world to come—*Olam haBa*—is the Jewish concept of life after death. There is not a wide-ranging discussion on the nature of this afterlife. One of the few descriptions of *Olam haBa* describes a world that is quite different from our own world. One talmudic passage teaches:

In the World to Come there will be no eating, or drinking or procreation or business, or jealousy or hatred or competition, but the righteous will sit with crowns on their heads enjoying the radiance of the Shechinah, the Divine Presence.

Who merits this world to come? In Mishna Sanhedrin we are told that all Israel has a portion in the World to Come (10:1). And in the Tosefta Sanhedrin we are told: the righteous among the nations of the world will have a share in the world to come. We don’t know what it will be like, how can we comprehend of a disembodied existence..but we are assured by Jewish tradition that we are all given a portion in the world to come...in other words, Jewish tradition allows us to hold out hope that we each will be given a life beyond the one that we live in this world.

Teachers of Judaism—from the Rabbis of the Talmud to your rabbi and my colleagues—are hesitant to speak about the concept of the soul and the afterlife for many reasons.

First, it is difficult to prove and doesn't fit with our usual scientific approach to Jewish study. Second, there is the great risk that a discussion of death and the afterlife will distract people from their lives here on earth and their responsibilities in THIS world. And third, we don't often discuss the soul and the afterlife because we prefer to deny death in our culture as we deny aging which leads to death.

Why do I speak about this topic this morning? Because I believe that when we develop our belief in the afterlife and in the immortality of the soul, we are better able to face and accept death. We are better able to live our lives in the face of death if we can see that our souls were gifts from God that return to that Compassionate God and find peace in a realm that is beyond our world, a realm that is unlike this world and so a world that is free of suffering, pain and misery.

Many times I have stood with relatives around the bedside of their loved one who is dying. I have helped the family say goodbye and helped their loved one let go. I have prayed for God to take the souls of people who are imprisoned in bodies wracked with pain in the dying process. I have helped relatives find a way to allow their loved ones to go, to accept their death and support them in the dying process. I can do this because I believe in the immortality of the soul. I believe that the soul that we are given lives on and thrives whether our body is fully functioning or not. Our soul remains.

When I was a hospital chaplain, I was very firm with the staff in the Cardiac Intensive Care. I insisted that staff be respectful of people who were comatose, that they not talk in the person's presence as if he or she was not there or about anything for that matter. I tried to teach people to act as if the person could hear everything we were saying out of respect...and because I really believe they can hear...if they can't hear in their minds, they can hear in their souls. I am sure I am not alone in my experience of speaking with a person who by all medical criteria cannot hear but knowing that he or she can hear...

When people tell me that their loved one is dying, that the doctors and nurses think the time of death is near, I always ask if they have told their loved one everything they need to tell them. It is never too late to speak to their souls. When we believe in the power of the soul...And when we believe in the immortality of the soul, it becomes easier to accept death and it becomes easier to give our loved ones comfort, compassion and dignity in their dying process.

As we remember our loved ones [this Yom Kippur] [during the service of Yizkor], let us take comfort in Judaism's teachings about the soul. As we reflect on the people we loved who are now gone, the people that we loved, that we no longer have with us physically, let us be comforted by the thought that their souls live on beyond their bodies.

Let us be comforted by the possibility that they watch over us and guide us. Let us remember what they taught us so that as they watch from Heaven or Olam haBa or God's embrace...they will be proud of us. As we consider our loved ones who have left this earth, let us remember why they made the world a better place and let us continue the work that they left to us.

[Auditorium ending:

On Yom Kippur we do our best to live soul-ful lives, focusing on the spiritual gifts God gave us as we set aside the physical needs of our being. May you each be inspired on this day to live good lives. May you find a new respect for the Jewish idea of the soul that inspires your life and informs your understanding of death. May you not fear death or life but rather embrace the many gifts we are given as we are created b'tzelem elohim, in God's image, with God's breath...and with divine purpose...]

As we ask God to remember and take care of the souls of our loved ones, we pledge to do our own work. We pledge to give tzedekah in their memory. We pledge to maintain their memory through the recitation of Kaddish and the observance of Yizkor at Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Pesah and Shavuot. We pledge to remember their souls so that they are bound up in the bonds of life...On this Yizkor of Yom Kippur, we ponder our own lives; we remember our life with our loved ones now gone and we consider their souls as they live on through eternity. May they rest in peace.