



Series on Belief & Faith - Afterlife

The Afterlife, Messiah and Redemption



***Noahide Nations Nagid Clergy
Continuing Education Program***

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The Afterlife, Messiah and Redemption

Introduction

As we learned a few lessons ago, both Judaism and Noahism believe in the immortality of the soul. Naturally, this entails belief in an afterlife. Yet, there is a very sharp distinction between the western, Christianized view of the afterlife and the Torah's view.

Keeping Perspective

Compared to other belief systems, Judaism and Noahism focus very little on the afterlife. The afterlife is a particular pre-occupation of Christianity and Islam and an obsession that establishes the afterlife as the ultimate goal of all worldly activity. However, Torah references to the afterlife are almost non-existent. In fact, discussion of the afterlife is almost taboo and distasteful in many circles.

Many authors note this ongoing de-emphasis of the afterlife in Torah thought, connecting it to the exodus from Egypt. Egypt was a society obsessed with the afterworld to the point of corruption. Their afterlife was more real, immediate, and relevant than anything of this world.

Part of God's plan in taking the Jews out of Egypt was to cleanse them of this undue focus and set their priorities straight. God wants us to fulfill His will in this world – that is the purpose of creation. Therefore, the Torah is conspicuously devoid of any mention of the afterlife. The little we know about the afterlife and the World-to-Come is from scant references in the prophets, writings, and Oral Torah.

What is more, the rabbinic world has followed this trend, placing all of its emphasis on defining the fulfillment of God's will in this world. The study of the afterlife has remained a “fuzzy” topic for scholars.

While we know the general principles and order of things, the specific details are unclear. We must recall that no one has ever seen the afterlife. What we know about it we believe to be true with absolute faith. However, we must also have the humility to admit that which we do not know.

Taking this fact into account, scholars have realized that attempting to pin down a precise vision of the afterlife is not only impossible, but ultimately not a good use of their time.

“Heaven” and “Hell?”

Judaism and Noahism do not believe in heaven and hell. The idea of eternal damnation and suffering without relief just doesn't work. Consider that we believe God punishes commensurate with deeds. Eternal punishment isn't commensurate with anyone's deeds because no one, now, never, or ever, is infinitely evil or has committed an infinite number of evil deeds.

Another problem with hell is that God's purpose for creating the world was the bestowal of good. Let's imagine that a theoretically infinitely-evil person exists and does get sent to hell for all eternity. Now, if God's purpose is good, yet this person will receive none if it ever again, then why does this evil person continue to exist at all? Is it that God is sadistic and wants to make our evil person suffer forever? It is possible to argue that eternal suffering exists as a deterrent from transgression. However, this is not a compelling argument; there are better ways to discourage sin.

The concept of Heaven is equally perplexing. A place where everyone gets the same reward regardless of their deeds?

Also, where do heaven and hell leave the early realm? In this paradigm of the afterlife, this world is has little purpose; the emphasis is entirely on the future life.

Christianity, well aware of these problems, has wrestled with them for centuries. Rather than coming to compelling consensus, their doctrine has become highly fragmented. This fracturing of belief is the source of many doctrinal disputes and widely differing eschatologies.

Judaism and Noahism, on the other hand don't suffer from this doctrinal schizophrenia because we have a very different vision of the afterlife.

Gan Eden

The following description of the afterlife and future worlds are summarized from Gesher HaChayim, The Bridge of Life, by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky, Derech HaShem, The Way of God, by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, and An Essay on Fundamentals, also by Rabbi

Luzzatto. This presentation is a general overview of the beliefs, yet is nothing here is an iron-clad fundamental-of-the-faith.

God prepared a number of places for the soul. In this physical world at this time, the place of the soul is the body. However, when the body is no longer available, God prepared another repository: *Gan Eden*, the Garden of Eden. The Garden has an upper garden and a lower garden.

The Lower Garden

While both gardens are entirely spiritual, the lower one is a “shadow,” a spiritual simulacrum of the physical world. In this lower realm the souls maintain an image of their physical form. Similarly, the delights of this lower realm are limited, experienced much as greatest pleasures of the physical world.

The Upper Garden

The upper garden, however, is a place where souls exist in their abstract, truest essence; they do not maintain the “shadow” of their physical form. Likewise, the delights of this upper garden are abstract and uniquely spiritual, devoid of corollary in the physical world.

The Gardens are not static. They experiences “seasons” and a spiritual “time” all of its own. Its delights, the fruits of the garden, change regularly with the seasons.

Shoel / Chibbut HaKever

However, the ability to enter these spiritual gardens necessitates the soul’s detachment from the physical realm. The committing of transgressions has the effect of binding and entangling the soul with the physical world. In order for the soul to ascend, it must be carefully dis-entangled from *olam ha-zeh*, material existence.

Recall from our previous lesson on reward and punishment that punishment is not a “punishment for” as much as a “natural consequence of” sin.

We can now understand what this means. The “punishment” of sin is the disentanglement of the soul from the body. By nature, this is an unpleasant process, like disentangling a cotton ball from a thorn bush. The greater the transgressions, the more entangled the soul the longer and more unpleasant the experience.

Burial and Decomposition

This process begins with burial and the process of decomposition. Upon placement of the body in the grave (*shoel*), the “physical trap” of the soul returns to its source, losing its form and illusory autonomy. For approximately 12 months the soul hovers above the grave “grieving” and “mourning” for the loss of the body. This is the implication of the verses:

His soul mourns for him,¹

and,

His flesh grieves for him.²

This process, called *chibbut ha-kever*, the atonement/purification of the grave, is of tremendous anguish to the soul.

Gehinnom

Once the soul has completed this *chibbut kever*, purification of the grave, it is then judged. At this point, the soul stands before the ultimate truth and must confront all of its deeds. This part of the afterlife is known as *Gehinnom*.

Since this is a purely spiritual process, it cannot be adequately described in words. Nevertheless, the Talmud, Midrash, and other sources attempt to convey the experience of the soul using graphic, often terrifying parables. For example, the description of *Gebenom* as a place of fire refers to the shame the soul experience as it stands before the ultimate truth.

The process of *Gebenom* is by not a permanent one; it lasts, at most, for only 12 months. After this point, the soul may ascend to the gardens.

Olam HaBa

Gan Eden, the Garden, *Gehinnom* – all of these places are temporary. The permanent place of man's reward is the World to Come, *Olam HaBa*. This future era, ushered in by the coming of the Messiah and resurrection of the dead (topics of future lessons), is one of the most mysterious and least-understood of God's creations.

Although the World to Come is a creation of G-d, no two souls experience it the same way. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, in his *Nefesh HaChayim* describes the unique experience of the world to come as follows:

¹ Job 14:22. See Shabbos 152a.

² Ibid.

A person's own deeds constitute his reward in the World to Come. Once the soul has departed the body, it arises to take pleasure and satisfaction in the power and light of the holy worlds that have been created and multiplied by his good deeds. This is what the Sages meant when they said: "All of Israel have a portion to the World to Come," and not in the World-to-Come. In implies that the World to Come is prepared and awaiting a person from the time of Creation, as if it was something existing on its own and of which man may receive as a reward. In truth, the World to Come is built of the expansion and multiplication of ones deeds into a place for himself... so too with the punishment of Gehenom, the sin itself is his punishment.

The structure and space of the world to come is directly related to the mitzvos of an individual. Within that space, the eternal reward of his *mitzvos* is received. The amount of reward, however, is directly tied to the merit one accumulated in this world.

There is a lack of clarity and agreement as to whether the World to Come is physical or entirely spiritual. There is also confusion as to the various roles within that world, the nature of *mitzvos*, and the purpose of worship, holidays, and the third temple.

In truth, though, these details are not entirely for us to know, but to find out eventually.

For those wanting to read more, see the *Bridge of Life* by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky (published by Moznaim) and the *Way of God* by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (published by Feldheim).

Summary of the Lesson

1. Upon death and burial, the process of decay begins. This atonement for the physical flesh via the grave is called *shoel*, literally, the grave.
2. As the soul decomposes, the soul undergoes a process of disentanglement from the body. This is known as *chibbut ha-kever*, the atonement/purification of the grave.
3. Following *chibbut ha-kever*, the soul then undergoes the first of a series of judgments. This is called *Gebinom*.
4. *Gebinnom* is the laying bare of one's sins in the light of complete truth. The many metaphors for *Gebinnom* found in the sources speak primarily to the emotional experience of *Gebinnom*.
5. The entire process of *Shoel*, *chibbut ha-kever*, and *Gebinnom*, takes 12 months at most.
6. Once the soul has been judged and is freed from its attachments to the physical, it ascends to *Gan Eden*, the Garden of Eden.
7. The Garden contains upper and lower gardens for different souls of different natures.
8. The Gardens experience seasons, fruits, and all the other varieties to be expected in a physical garden. Of course, these are all allegories for a non-physical place.
9. The soul awaits in the Gardens until the coming of the messiah. At this time the souls are reborn, experiencing resurrection.
10. The resurrection and rebirth is into a new world called *Olam Haba* – the world to Come.
11. The World to Come is a not well understood; it is also experienced differently by each soul commensurate with the *mitzvos* of that soul during its first lifetime.