

# Heaven and Hell

by Mel Waldman

I believe that Heaven and Hell are here on earth, partly in the physical world and partly in our minds. Throughout my life, I have experienced and witnessed the traumas of death, loss, suffering, and evil. As a psychotherapist, I have also heard the heartrending stories of others who have suffered and experienced unspeakable horrors. Thus, through my work, I have become intimate with evil.

I have spoken with patients dying of cancer, AIDS, and other terminal illnesses and they have shared their deepest thoughts and feelings about life and death. I have also had meaningful and insightful dialogues with the survivors of life-threatening illnesses.

I have listened to war stories, prison stories, and urban tales of child abuse, physical and mental abuse, rape, domestic violence, and murder. One mother talked about her dead daughter who had been murdered by a serial killer. Another woman revealed the traumas of being raped by multiple members of her family — her stepfather, uncle, and grandfather. One man witnessed the collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11. These are a few of the hundreds of stories I have heard. The stories are numerous and incomprehensible.

On a very personal note, my wife's mother, left behind in Vienna to get treatments for an eye disease, witnessed her grandparents (my wife's great-grandparents) being murdered by the Nazis. She hid under a bed and miraculously survived, invisible to Hitler's men.

Eventually, my wife's grandmother returned to Vienna for her daughter and took her to America. While my wife's mother and grandmother were on the ship to New York, Hitler's army invaded Vienna. Furthermore, my wife informed me that, apparently, her mother had amnesia for the horrific events that had occurred. A few years before she died, she remembered and revealed what she had witnessed in Vienna.

But for me, my personal demons emerged and loomed before me at home. My father was a terror, having been terrorized by his father. His rage and twisted perceptions of me wounded me for many years. He did not physically abuse me. (At least, I do not recall such abuse.) But his threats of physical violence and his diatribes were emotionally damaging and cutting. Most days he castigated and condemned me.

A pariah and outsider in my own home, I hid in my room and developed my mind. And although my mother loved me unconditionally, she could not protect me from Father's wrath. She tried, but she failed!

Nevertheless, my home was both Heaven and Hell. Mother's absolute faith in my and unconditional love opened the doors to Heaven. On the other hand, Father's wrath and hatred

opened the dark gates of Hell. Near the end of my father's life, we made peace with each other. Indeed, we shared a deep love for a brief period of time before his passing.

Sometimes I wonder why it took a lifetime for us to openly love each other. Yet, miraculously, we partly repaired our souls by letting go of the hatred that had crippled us. For many years, the venom we shared had launched us into the black holes of despair. Ultimately, we learned that only love could free us.

Thus, my life experiences and the stories others have shared with me in my personal and professional lives, as well as the books I have read about the horrific events that have occurred in the history of mankind (and not just books but other forms of knowledge of our dark past) — all have led me to believe that Heaven and Hell exist right here on earth and not in a mythical afterlife. Yet in my recent explorations of Judaism, I discovered, to my surprise, that Judaism believes in an afterlife.

Before discussing the nature of this Jewish afterlife, I must confess that, at times in my life, I have wished that the concept of life after death referred to a real world beyond human existence. In touch with my own mortality, I have been afraid of death and dying. Indeed, the thought of being dead forever has terrified me. Therefore, I prayed to G-d for proof of His existence and life after death — specifically asking for evidence of Heaven and even reincarnation. Yet what are the implications of life after death for man?

#### *Olam Ha'zeh* — This World

Judaism focuses on *Olam Ha'zeh* — This World — the earthly world. At the core of Judaism is a covenant between G-d and his chosen people in this life. Agreements and promises pertain to this earthly existence. Thus, the afterlife is less important to Judaism in contrast to other world religions. Nevertheless, Judaism believes in an afterlife.

#### *Olam Haba* — The World To Come

##### The Afterlife

According to Jewish belief, *Olam Haba*, also referred to as 'The World To Come' and the afterlife, consists of Gan Eden and Gehinnom. Gan Eden is a spiritual Paradise where only the very just and righteous go directly. It is not the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve dwelled.

Yet there are other conceptions of Gan Eden that are less spiritual. "Talmudic imagery includes: sitting at golden banquet tables (Babylonian Talmud, *tractate Taanit* 25a) or at stools of gold (Babylonian Talmud, *tractate ketubot* 77b), enjoying lavish banquets (Babylonian Talmud, *tractate Baba Batra* 75a), or celebrating the Sabbath, enjoying the sunshine and sexual intercourse (Babylonian Talmud, *tractate Berachot*, 57b)" (cited in Jewish beliefs on the afterlife — religionfacts, the Internet). In this discussion, however, Gan Eden is depicted as a place of spiritual perfection and reward.

As noted above, only the very righteous go directly to Gan Eden.

“The average person descends to a place of punishment or purification generally referred to as Gehinnom, but sometimes as She’ol or by other names. According to one mystical view, every sin we commit creates an angel of destruction (a demon) and, after we die, we are punished by the demons we have created. Some views see Gehinnom as one of severe punishment, a bit like the Christian Hell of fire and brimstone. Other sources merely see it as a time when we can see the actions of our lives objectively — the harm that we have done and the opportunities we missed — and experience remorse for our actions. The period of time in Gehinnom does not exceed 12 months and then one ascends to his place in *Olam-Ha-Ba*” (Rich, 1999).

Furthermore:

“Only the utterly wicked do not ascend at the end of this period; their souls are punished for the entire 12 months. Sources differ on what happens at the end of those 12 months: some say that the wicked soul is utterly destroyed and ceases to exist, while others say that the soul continues in a state of consciousness of remorse” (Rich, 1999).

While some compare Gehinnom to Hell (see above), others view it as Purgatory. In the classical Jewish view of Gehinnom, souls are not tortured forever (see above). Indeed, Judaism explains Gehinnom “as a profound spiritual experience which cannot be comprehended by the limited human mind as long as one is restricted within the material world. It is described as an experience of intense embarrassment and frustration...” (Winkler, 1981).

Furthermore, “the ‘purification’ is then the painful process of ‘cold-turkey withdrawal of the disembodied consciousness from its heretofore exclusive relationship with the material, enabling it subsequently to bask in the eternal bliss of the purely spiritual (Paradise)’” (Winkler, 1981).

Through the Jewish concept of *t’shuvah* — penance — the individual can perfect the soul while still alive by expressing remorse. *T’shuvah* means “return” and by returning to “the absolute focal point of reality” (Winkler, 1981), the individual moves closer to G-d. In the afterlife, the process is one of “soul-reparation and perfection” (Winkler, 1981).

### Implications of an Afterlife

In my interpretations of Gehinnom, I find disturbing implications that seem incompatible with an all-good and loving G-d. Although Gehinnom, conceived as Purgatory or Hell, appears radically different from the Christian notion of Hell, it still involves torture, although falling very short of eternal damnation.

And I cannot comprehend how a loving G-d would torture the dead. Even if there is no physical torture in Gehinnom, emotional, psychological, and spiritual torture seem unjustified.

Certainly, my understanding is limited. Perhaps, the pain experienced there is not equivalent to the psychological torture terrorists use in our earthly world. According to Kabbalists, “everything happens for the best” (Kurzweil, 2007).

This view seems to overlap with Cognitive Behavioral Therapies (CBT) and psychoanalysis. With CBT, individuals learn to change their thoughts, perceptions, and patterns of thinking and eventually perceive a new reality, often more positive and spiritual than the previous one. Similarly, through psychoanalysis, individuals uncover deeper layers of reality, and ultimately, have the opportunity to discover the spiritual universe within and without.

Nevertheless, both CBT and psychoanalysis involve a painful process of self-exploration. Often patients are motivated to change because of the psychological pain they experience. In my opinion, these therapies do not work without such pain.

It is possible that “the profound spiritual experience” (Winkler, 1981) of Gehinnom may, indeed, lead to soul reparation and a greater good in The World To Be. But must torture be used to effect this spiritual metamorphosis? Or have the scholars simply been unable to capture the true nature of Gehinnom? Perhaps, there are no human words to describe this mysterious place.

A Franciscan priest states that “most people would never torture another human being under any conditions. Yet people believe in a god who not only tortures, but tortures for all eternity” (Rohr, 2007).

Once again, although the Jewish notion of Gehinnom seems to imply a limited period of torture, it is incomprehensible to me that my loving G-d would torture any souls at all. If the Jewish afterlife includes Heaven and Hell, I personally would prefer eternal nothingness after death, devoid of pain and suffering. I have suffered enough in this world and continue to struggle in a paradoxical universe where good people seem to suffer a lot and the wicked seem to enjoy the fruits of their labor and sins.

I still choose to believe in my all-good and loving G-d despite these incomprehensible interpretations of His Will. I question everything, including the kabbalistic view that everything is for the best. *Gam zu l'tovah!* This too is for the best!

#### References:

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