

Is There a Jewish Afterlife?

Judaism is famously ambiguous about what happens when we die.

BY MJL

What happens after we die?

Judaism is famously ambiguous about this matter. The immortality of the soul, the World to Come, and the resurrection of the dead all feature prominently in Jewish tradition, but exactly what these things are and how they relate to each other has always been vague.

READ: More on Jewish Death and Mourning

Jewish conceptions of heaven and hell — *Gan Eden* (Garden of Eden) and *Gehinnom* — are associated with the belief in immortality and/or the World to Come, and were also developed independent of these concepts.

Most Jewish ideas about the afterlife developed in post-biblical times.

What the Bible Says

The Bible itself has very few references to life after death. *Sheol*, the bowels of the earth, is portrayed as the place of the dead, but in most instances Sheol seems to be more a metaphor for oblivion than an actual place where the dead “live” and retain consciousness.

The notion of resurrection appears in two late biblical sources, [Daniel 12](#) and [Isaiah 25-26](#).

[Daniel 12:2](#) — “Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence” — implies that resurrection will be followed by a day of judgment. Those judged favorably will live forever and those judged to be wicked will be punished.

Resurrection and the Messiah

Later Jewish tradition, however, is not clear about exactly who will be resurrected, when it will happen, and what will take place.

Some sources imply that the resurrection of the dead will occur during the messianic era. Others indicate that resurrection will follow the messianic era. Similarly, according to some, only the righteous will be resurrected, while according to others, everyone will be resurrected and — as implied in Daniel — a day of judgment will follow.

The Daniel text probably dates to the second century BCE, and at some point during the two centuries that followed, another afterlife idea entered Judaism: the immortality of the soul, the notion that the human soul lives on even after the death of the body. In the Middle Ages, Jewish mystics expanded this idea, developing theories about reincarnation — the transmigration of the soul.

The World to Come

The World to Come (*olam haba*) is the most ubiquitous Jewish idea related to the end of days. It appears in early rabbinic sources as the ultimate reward of the individual Jew (and possibly the righteous gentile). The Talmud contains scattered descriptions of the World to Come, sometimes comparing it to spiritual things such as studying Torah, other times comparing it to physical pleasures, such as sex.

However, not surprisingly, it is not obvious what exactly the “World to Come” is and when it will exist. According to Nahmanides, among others, the World to Come is the era that will be ushered in by the resurrection of the dead, the world that will be enjoyed by the righteous who have merited additional life. According to Maimonides, the World to Come refers to a time even beyond the world of the resurrected. He believed that the resurrected will eventually die a *second* death, at which point the souls of the righteous will enjoy a spiritual, bodiless existence in the presence of God.

Still, in other sources, the World to Come refers to the world inhabited by the righteous immediately following death—i.e. heaven, Gan Eden. In this view, the World to Come exists *now*, in some parallel universe.

Heaven and Hell

Indeed, the notion of heaven and hell may be the most ambiguous of all Jewish afterlife ideas. References to Gehinnom as a fiery place of judgment can be found in the apocalyptic literature of the [Second Temple period](#). The [Talmud](#) [★](#) embellished this idea, claiming that Gehinnom is 60 times hotter than earthly fire ([Berakhot 57b](#) [🔗](#)).

The earliest reference to Gan Eden (the Garden of Eden) and Gehinnom as a pair is probably the rabbinic statement of the 1st century sage [Yochanan ben Zakkai](#): “There are two paths before me, one leading to Gan Eden and the other to Gehinnom ([Berakhot 28b](#) [🔗](#)).”

Many questions remain, however. If the sources that refer to the World to Come are referring to Gan Eden, then what is the world of the resurrected? And if judgment immediately follows death, then what need is there for the judgment that will follow the resurrection?

Though some Jewish scholars have tried to clarify these ideas, it would be impossible to reconcile all the Jewish texts and sources that discuss the afterlife.

[Sign up for a Journey Through Grief & Mourning: Whether you have lost a loved one recently or just want to learn the basics of Jewish mourning rituals, this 8-part email series will guide you through everything you need to know and help you feel supported and comforted at a difficult time.](#)