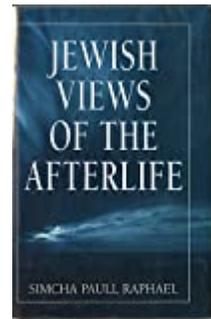




Simcha Paul Raphael. *Jewish Views of the Afterlife.* New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1994. xxxvi + 474 pp. \$46.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56821-938-7; \$64.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87668-583-9.



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Jewish Views of the Afterlife

Simcha Paul Raphael's sourcebook of texts on the afterlife is a most welcome addition to this type of Jewish literature. He has thoroughly collected references on the subject and has provided thorough introductions to each period (from Bible to the contemporary era). Major debates on many issues, such as the Maimonidean view of physical resurrection, are treated as well-written surveys. He offers a comfortable melange of the scholarly and the popular, thus producing a well-balanced book which will appeal to many readers. He is writing for the "general intelligent reader," a worthy goal too often neglected.

Raphael offers an extensive array of texts because he works with a wide definition of the afterlife. He treats: immortality of the soul, the fate of wandering deceased spirits, postmortem judgment, individual reward and punishment, mythical visions of hell and heaven, reincarnation, resurrection, as well as innumerable rabbinic and hasidic folktales that express a belief in the soul's continued survival after death (p. 16). He opens with a most provocative subject, "is there afterlife after Auschwitz" and proceeds chronologically through biblical material, apocryphal literature, rabbinic Judaism, me-

dieval midrash and philosophy, kabbalah, hasidic material and a "contemporary psychology of the afterlife." Each chapter is thorough. For instance, the biblical section systematically treats biblical references to burial practices. Genesis 49, Jacob's instructions on burial, "bury with my fathers in a cave ..." allows us to understand the significance of family burials and treatment of the dead. He traces the awakening of individual consciousness in the life of Israel. He claims that prior to the Babylonian exile, national consciousness informed the character of the people, but afterwards, when the people were removed from their land, they assumed a less corporate, more individual approach.(pp. 61-2). Raphael's use of his sources to respond to various academic issues is impressive although he does not offer any substantial analyses of the source-critical views on the subject. He espouses Gershom Scholem's views on the subject as the only available ones since Graetz and other nineteenth century Jewish historians ignored the topic of the afterlife.

His book is motivated by his love for these texts and his desire to educate people in the Jewish response to

death, and other matters of this ilk. Being drawn to the Jewish renewal movement, he wants to reawaken an appreciation of Judaism through its texts on this subject. Relating a story of a woman who wanted to console her dying grandmother with Yiddish love poetry and the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, he offers the Jewish spirit texts that are produced in a Jewish milieu. He advances a “Jewish Book of the Dead” which would become part of the Jewish renewal movement, and the general literature on thanatology (study of death and dying). His lengthy conclusion, “A Contemporary Psychological Model of the Afterlife” is a detailed discussion of how Jewish texts contribute to the subject of death and dying. He uses, as his starting point, Buddhist sources to illuminate substantial Jewish texts. The Tibetan’s Ground Luminosity, “consciousness itself dissolves into the all-encompassing space of truth” (p. 373), is compared to Zohar’s Shekhinah where the “soul goes out in joy and love to meet the Shekhinah.”

Raphael guides the reader throughout the four (or five) aspects of the world, its relations to the journey of the soul and reflects on its psychological implications. “Eschatology equals psychology” (Zalman Schachter-Shalomi’s words) is treated seriously. He describes the experience of the soul after death in these terms: “a journey of consciousness in which the disembodied being encounters a sequence of visionary experiences and tribulations, designed to resolve various incomplete aspects of the life just completed” (p. 400). At first it may seem alarming to reduce everything to the psychological approach, but Raphael’s candidness with the reader allows one to forgive some of these excesses. In concert with this approach is his claim (or indulgence) that the Jewish renewal movement is “one of the most

major trends of cultural influence in our age” (p. 359). His biases are evident from Zalman Schachter-Shalomi’s forward. This delightful introductory personal confession of doubt, awakening, and midrash (in typical original Schacterian style) is a welcome addition to the book.

Although the book’s material often is easy to navigate on its own because of the repetitive nature of post-body experiences throughout the ages, I would have appreciated more direction on how to read the sources. Raphael offers long introductions on medieval thought, concisely explicating diverse aspects of Maimonidean thought, but leaves the reader without an anchor in other periods. For instance, *Seder Gan Eden*, a medieval “midrash” on the upper world, with its descriptions of the righteous, their spiritual/intellectual activities (of both genders) in their new world, needs further treatment to identify where it fits into Jewish thought. He notes that it shares much with zoharic literature (p. 140), but does not explicate the difficulties of reading this text. Does it originate from the philosophic school—some of its technical terms would suggest this—or is it a part of zoharic literature and requires decoding with the aid of sefirot? *Seder Gan Eden* also shares much with hekhalot literature and should be read against that backdrop.

In the end, this book is a wonderful addition to a literature that was largely out of reach for many. May it have a long afterlife and ceaseless wanderings through the universe!

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