

The Rational Passover Haggadah

For Discussion Does Judaism Affirm the Afterlife? Does Reason?

The last statement of this prayer speaks of this life and an afterlife. This is an affirmation of the Jewish belief in an afterlife.

Many Jews do not believe in an afterlife and believe that Judaism doesn't either. I once attended a funeral at which a prominent rabbi officiated. To probably everyone present, nothing unusual occurred; the service was a traditional one and the remarks made by the rabbi about the deceased were moving.

Then, at the grave, the rabbi spoke about Judaism's attitude toward death. "Judaism does not believe in a life after death," he said. "Rather, we live on in the good works we do and in the memories of those we leave behind."

Because this is what many contemporary Jews believe, few people at the funeral found reason to take particular notice of these remarks. But what the rabbi said was incorrect.

Jews who believe that there is no reality beyond death are certainly entitled to hold such a belief. They may even be right. But that is their belief, not what Judaism teaches. The entry under "Afterlife" in the scholarly and secular *Encyclopedia Judaica* begins, "Judaism has always maintained a belief in an afterlife." See, among many examples, the eleventh chapter of the Talmudic tractate *Sanhedrin* and Maimonides's *Thirteen Principles of Faith*.

It is true that the Torah and even later Judaism give no details about what happens after death. Judaism wants its adherents to focus on this world. One reason Judaism prohibits its priests from coming into contact with the dead—a prohibition that may be unique among the world's religions—is that a Jewish priest's focus must be on this world and life, not on the next world and death.

But the affirmation of this world does not mean this life is all there is.

Since Judaism and all monotheistic religions are predicated upon the existence of a God Who is nonphysical and beyond nature, and Who is just and loving, our physical existence cannot be the only reality. It is implausible that a just and loving God would create a world wherein the sum total of His creations' existence is unjust suffering. To state this case as starkly as possible, if there is nothing after this life, the Nazis and their

victims have identical fates. If I believed such a thing, I would either become an atheist or hate the god who had created such a cruel and absurd universe.

As for the rabbi's statement that we live on through the memories of loved ones, what would the rabbi say about the millions of Jews whose loved ones also died during the Holocaust? If people live on solely through the memories of their loved ones, then, obviously, many of the six million did not live on. They are nothing more than forgotten smoke. Meanwhile, the evil that people do often does live on.

Those who wish to believe that this life is all there is should acknowledge that this belief renders the lives of many people little more than a cruel joke.

Furthermore, those who believe that this life is the only reality are likely to be led to one or more of three negative conclusions about life:

1. Hedonism: If this life is all one has, it is quite logical to live a life devoted to self-gratification. If the physical is the only reality, we should experience as much physical pleasure as possible. To paraphrase an old beer slogan, the message is, "You only go around once in life, so get all the gusto you can."

2. Utopianism: Not all people who believe this life is all there is affirm hedonism. But many of these embrace a considerably more dangerous ideology: utopianism, the desire to make heaven on earth (given that there is no other heaven). Hence the attraction of utopianism to so many twentieth-century radicals who rejected Judaism and Christianity. In light of the hells on earth that secular utopians have produced, it should be clear just how important it is to defer Utopia to a God-made future world.

3. Despair: Considering the great physical and emotional pain that so many people experience, what is more likely to induce despondency than the belief that this life is all there is? The malaise felt by so many people living in modern society is not traceable to material deprivation but, in large part, to the despair induced by the belief that this world is all there is. That is why peasants with religious faith are often happier than affluent people who have no faith.