

Death and the Afterlife in Jewish Thought: Between Tradition, Belief, and Kabbalistic Esotericism

Dr Haddaji Ibtissam

Independent Scholar, Morocco

Exploring the concept of death within Judaism may seem audacious, yet it is encouraged by the tradition of inquiry intrinsic to Jewish thought. Despite the caution urged by rabbinic authorities, Jewish texts ranging from the Torah to mystical writings offer rich perspectives on death, the soul, and the afterlife. This article examines how death is represented in Jewish belief and practice, considering diverse expressions from ritual law, poetic literature, Kabbalistic cosmology, and esoteric traditions. Emphasis is placed on ritual practices, mourning customs, and metaphysical understandings of the soul, including Sheol, Gehenna, and Eden. The evolution of these beliefs is explored through rabbinic, mystical, and popular sources, across historical and cultural contexts.

Keywords: death, Judaism, Kabbalah, Zohar, soul, angels, mourning

“There is no man who has power over the breath of the spirit, and no one has power over the day of death” (Ecclesiastes 8:8)

Introduction

Judaism emerged around 1000 BCE in a polytheistic world as the first monotheistic religion. The Israelites' shift from polytheism to monotheism, especially after the Babylonian exile, deeply shaped Jewish beliefs on death. According to the texts, in Jerusalem, around the year 1000, the Hebrews settled in the Near East and founded a kingdom there which would later become their capital. These beliefs parallel ancient Greek views. Indeed, the notion of divinity is at the heart of Jewish beliefs: life is created by divine goodness. Originally, the Israelites were also polytheists (until the 7th century BC, Egyptian influences on Palestine led the first Jews to be polytheists). On the other hand, from the 6th century BC, Yahweh established himself as the founding god and the origin of life: “I will put breath in you and you will live” (Prophet Ezekiel, Ez. XXXVII, 6). At the level of post-mortem life, the Jewish vision is close to that of Homer and Hesiod: when man dies, nothing remains of him. Everything that made him alive thus disappears; the human being becomes a soul whose destiny is chosen by God (by the actions of the past life in Homer and Hesiod). We can clearly see the strong link between Jewish and Greek beliefs: they developed in the same geographical areas and in not very distant times. In Jewish thought, the soul (Nefesh) departs to Sheol, a shadowy underworld, much like Hades in Greek mythology. Later developments emphasized resurrection and spiritual elevation, particularly influenced by historical trauma and rabbinic reformation. Two places occupy the same function in two distinct religions. If Hades is divided into 23 out of 61 different places that welcome more or less tormented souls, Sheol seems to be a rather uniform place in which all souls stay. The pessimistic view of death among the Jews began in the 1st

century AD following three major events: the Babylonian Exile (586-528 BC), the 27th Maccabean Revolt (2nd century BC), and the establishment of Rabbinic Judaism (70-28-29 AD) which led the Jews to exalt the belief in the resurrection; indeed, the Babylonian exile had the most influence on the religious changes of the Jews. As a result, the development of synagogues during this exile led the Jews to increasingly respect the sacred texts, being a pessimistic spiritual refuge. While the Jews consider Yahweh to be the only god, other peoples also had their own gods. Their vision is therefore oriented towards monotheism. Despite the presence of several schools of thought within Judaism, the Jews believe that the deceased do not disappear after death, but remain alive, especially with their loved ones. It is therefore not surprising that the Jewish cemetery is called the house of life "Beit Haim".

Death Rituals and Mourning Practices

In Jewish tradition, the body of the deceased must be treated with utmost respect. The *Hevra Kadisha*, a burial society, performs *Tahara*, the ritual purification. Burial should ideally be accomplished within 24 hours. Mourning is codified in a series of phases:

1. *Aninut* (before burial): mourners are exempt from positive commandments.
2. *Shiva* (seven days): includes home-bound mourning and daily prayers (especially *Kaddish*).
3. *Shloshim* (30 days): allows partial resumption of daily life, but social participation remains limited.
4. *Jahrzeit* (anniversary): marked by fasting, Torah study, *tzedakah*, and recitation of *Kaddish*.

These rites aim not only to honor the deceased but also to support the mourners spiritually: covering mirrors, lighting a candle, and tearing one's clothing. Unlike in other religions, the period during which the body is present in the home, exposed to the view of the family, must be as short as possible. It is important that the burial should take place as soon as possible and very quickly, ideally within 24 hours, as is the practice in Israel. It is only once the coffin is sealed that the traditional seven-day mourning period begins for loved ones. As for the ritual impurity of the corpse, it stems from the purity laws enacted during the time of the Temple in Jerusalem. These were a number of criteria used to decide whether or not an individual or object was able to participate in Temple service. Impurity could be transformed into purity by performing specific purification rites, including ablution. At the time, a person who had contact with a dead person could not even access the Temple Mount, let alone enter it. Today, these laws are no longer enforced as such, but the corpse remains the major source of impurity. The rites of purification of the body will be performed by authorized persons: the "*Hevra Kadisha*". They are performed either at home or at the burial place. Failing this, care must be taken to ensure that the body is clean and treated decently. This is called the *Tahara*. In practice, the only remaining consequence is the prohibition for a *kohen*, that is, a descendant of the line of priests, to visit a cemetery, except to bury one of his relatives. Furthermore, except in certain special cases, the body of the deceased is not allowed into the synagogue. The fate of the body after death does not seem to be a major issue in Jewish tradition. Thousands of writings have appeared on the Law and the moral principles that should govern life here below. Metaphysical questions occupy only a minor place in rabbinic writings. What happens after death is unknown, and no one ever knows anything about it, not even the Prophet. Of course, resurrection is one of the principles of Judaism. It is stated in various ways in the Bible, such as in Ezekiel's vision: "The hand of the Lord was upon me, and the Lord carried me out in spirit and set me down in the middle of the valley, which was full of bones". "He said to me, Son of man, can these bones live again? There was a roar as I prophesied, then a shaking, and the bones came together, one on top of another. I saw that there were sinews on them, and

that flesh had grown, and that skin was spread over them. And breath entered them, and they lived, and they stood up again, an exceedingly great multitude”.

Sequences of Strict Mourning

In traditional codification, mourning, which begins with the announcement of death, concerns those close to the deceased: father, mother, brother, sister, wife, child and lasts a year. Rites in which the mourners are both actors and objects then delineate sequences of unequal duration. The first, relatively short, from death to the end of the burial, determines the status of the “grieving one”. The latter is no longer bound by the positive commandments of Judaism but must take care of the burial. This period is marked by numerous prohibitions, professional, religious, dietary, and sexual. The afflicted person may not carry out their professional activity, engage in their usual activities (sports, leisure, etc.), rejoice, or greet people. They may only perform minimal hygiene, may not wear new or pressed clothes, and are not allowed to have marital relations. They may not have their hair cut nor shave, and women may not wear makeup or elegant clothing. Regarding food, it is forbidden to consume meat and wine. These ancient and medieval customs persist, tracing the outdated beliefs or testimonies to their vitality: lighting a candle symbolizing the soul of the deceased, covering mirrors, overturning furniture practices signifying the upheaval in the atmosphere caused by the recent death of the lost one. The most significant rite in this sequence is the *keriah*, the tearing of a garment over the heart on the day of burial, which materially marks loss and grief. After the burial, the second period begins, the *shloshim* (thirty), which lasts a month, determines the status of “the mourner” and begins with *shiva* (seven), a week-long period of seclusion. Its duration is based partly on the biblical episode in which Joseph mourned his father for seven days (Genesis 10). Silence is broken during the collective prayer service, prayers for the repose of the soul of the deceased, prayers for acceptance of divine judgment and especially the prayer in Aramaic, emblematic of mourning since the 12th century, the *Kaddish* for Orthodox and traditionalists; this prayer requires the presence of ten religiously adult men (at least 30 years old). These men are therefore “comforters” who come to the home every morning or evening to surround the bereaved and recite these prayers collectively. Beginning with the consolation meal, this sequence ends with a ceremony, *hesger* (closing), which includes prayers, Talmudic or esoteric exegesis, and a final meal. The mourners can then resume their professional activities and remove their mourning clothes, but they still do not shave. They may neither marry nor attend social events (sports competitions, cinema, theatre, non-religious festivities of any kind). During the remaining *shloshim*, they continue to recite the *Kaddish* until the final ceremony in memory of the deceased, a ceremony that often includes a religious study. This is also the time for the laying of the tombstone, which can also take place during the *jahrzeit*. Mourning for a parent—father or mother—continues until the anniversary of the death or burial, *jahrzeit* (Ashkenazi), *hazkara* (Sephardic), but only the prohibition of participating in social events persists. *Kaddish* is recited every day for eleven months in a synagogue, and the anniversary is most often marked by fasting and a visit to the cemetery. The *hazkara* or *jahrzeit* is the anniversary of the death of a father or mother, which is marked annually. According to the sages, each year, on the anniversary of the death, the deceased is retried in the heavenly court. If it appears that the children he left behind commit sins, the soul of the deceased must be punished for this, because he did not educate them properly. If the children rise through good deeds, it appears that the memory of the parent, and the education he provided, continues to have a positive influence; from then on, his soul elevates, and he enjoys a good reward in the Garden of Eden. It is customary for children, on the anniversary of their parent’s death, to increase their Torah study, perform good

deeds, give tzedakah, pray, and recite Kaddish for the growth of their soul. Some people fast on this day as teshuvah. Anyone who finds fasting difficult is permitted to make a tzedakah, offering instead of fasting. In the past, it was customary to light a memorial candle (Ner Neshama) in the synagogue to add to the light during the service, in honor of Heaven. Nowadays that synagogues are lit with electric bulbs, there is no longer any need for this. However, in memory of this, some people customarily light a Ner Neshama at home. The main thing is to offer a donation for the upkeep of the synagogue, or for the poor. When possible, children go to the cemetery. And if it is possible without too much effort, other relatives join them.

Kabbalistic Conception of the Soul

The human soul, according to Kabbalah is classified into 3 types:

1. Lower soul, Nephesh;
2. Middle soul, Ruach;
3. Upper soul, Neshamah.

The Neshamah, the highest, comes from the Sephirah Binah, Intelligence. Ruach comes from the Sephirah Tiphereth, Beauty. Nephesh comes from the Sephirah Malchut, the Kingdom. Referring to the above-mentioned study on the Sephirah explaining that the first three are divine and intellectual, the following three are moral and the last ones are generative, we will understand the meaning of the different origins that the Kabbalah attributes to the three souls. The divine superior soul, Neshamah, comes from the intellectual and divine Sephirothic heart. Its characteristics are high thoughts, the contemplation of principles, the intuition of eternal truths, and also religious and merciful love. The middle, rational soul, Ruach, comes from the moral and arbitrary Sephirothic choir. It is distinguished by the feeling and conception of human laws, moral and legal faculties, rationality, the application to man, psychology, will, to the family, society and nations, and the principles glimpsed by Neshamah. The lower, instinctive soul, Nephesh, comes from the seraphic generative heart. Its characteristics are the vital instinct, the ability of the union with a material or ethereal organism. In human earthly life, Nephesh manifests first, then Ruach, and thirdly Neshamah. The Kabbalists note that some men receive only Nephesh (children who die in infancy, the feeble-minded, the savages), that most men receive Nephesh and Ruach, and elites receive Nephesh, Ruach, and Neshamah. The three souls should not be considered distinct to the point of complete separation. They rather form three degrees of the single Soul, total and ultra-conscious, and, depending on whether the lower, middle, or higher degrees of the ultra-conscious appear in the conscious, we say that 'man' has the lower, middle, or higher soul. Clear precisions and delineations prove indispensable to the intelligence in order to perceive the elements of things. But once this apperception is acquired, it is necessary, through a deeper, more initiatory vision, to understand that the elements merge together and identify with each other. Knowledge of things is distinction. The secret of things is unity. In Kabbalah, Man, in summary, is composed of:

1. Tangible body, of seven material elements;
2. Vital, corporeal fluid;
3. Instinctive soul, Nephesh;
4. Moral soul, Ruach;
5. Divine soul, Neshamah;
6. Life of God poured into the Soul, Chaia;
7. Supreme Union of the Soul with God, Yechidah.

Kabbalah admits reincarnation (in the etymological sense, which it calls Revolution in Hebrew Gilgul) of the soul. Further, About Christian Kabbalah, by studying the Torah, Kabbalists discovered the names of the 72 angelic genies of the celestial hierarchies. In Kabbalah, the name of God is composed of 72 letters, taken from the mystical text Shem Hamephorash of Exodus chapter 14 verses 19, 20 and 21, each of which is composed of 72 letters. In the original Hebrew text, this is the inedible name of God that the high priest murmured amidst the cries of the crowd. It was later replaced by the sacred Tetragrammaton YHWH. Kabbalah was shaped in a dialogue with its cultural milieu, including Muslim Sufism. Thinkers such as Bahya Ibn Paquda and Abraham Abulafia show clear parallels with Islamic mysticism. Kabbalistic angelology, including the 72 names of God, reveals complex views of divine mediation, spiritual ascent, and cosmic justice more specifically. Whatever form Kabbalah takes, in speculative texts, in contemplative mysticism, as well as in the drift towards practical Kabbalah and magic, it represents, in all these aspects, the reflection of a society.



Figure 1. This amulet invokes the protection of Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan, an important figure in Moroccan Judaism. The amulet's text includes Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan's name and the phrase "May his virtue protect us, Amen".

Source: photo © RMN-Grand Palais - Mahj / Franck Raux.

In Zohar 1:24Y; 54b and 126b, regarding the "seven trials that await man at death". The first trial is the one undergone at the moment the soul leaves the body: it punishes both for the sins committed. The second trial takes place when the funeral procession is led from the deceased's home to the cemetery. Throughout the journey, the man's actions and words precede him, publicly accusing and humiliating him. The transgressions, crimes, and offenses committed are proclaimed, followed by the punishment and chastisement he incurs and which await him in the world to come. The third ordeal is the one the deceased undergoes upon entering the tomb, considered the exit from this world and the threshold to another... The fourth ordeal is the infliction of the deceased in the tomb itself, immediately after burial, which rabbinic literature refers to as the *Hibbut ha-keber*, the flagellation of the tomb. The angel of death, relayed by the one nicknamed Dumah and who reigns over the world of silence, violently strikes the corpse with metal chains. The fifth ordeal is the passage to Gehenna, to hell. It is specifically intended to purify the soul. During the sixth ordeal, the body is delivered to vermin, which takes possession of it and devours it. It suffers terribly, as it is said: the bite of the worm is as painful for the body of the deceased (for his corpse) as the sting of a needle inserted into the flesh of the living. The seventh and final test: these are the continual migrations and transmigrations, successive incarnations and reincarnations. The soul is condemned to wander and wander here and there, without the slightest respite until

the end of its long and painful journey, which ends with its definitive redemption, with its redemption paid for during these wanderings and transmigrations, with the completion of the tasks it had to accomplish in this world.

Gehenna takes its name from a place near Jerusalem, the Valley of Hinnom. In this valley was Topheth (2 Kings 23:10), a site originally used for human sacrifices to the god Moloch, then destined to burn the garbage of city households. The Hebrew tradition places Gehenna at Arga, the fifth land, the latter includes Gehenna and the seven layers, each possessing its own storehouses of darkness.

The Paradise or Garden of Eden

After undergoing all these trials, the soul (Rouah) penetrates the paradise or garden of Eden. In Hebrew thought, paradise comprises seven doors or houses each leading to the next. The first House, opposite the entrance, hosts the converts who have come to God of their own free will. Its walls are of crystal, its beams of cedar and it is Obadiah, the righteous prophet, who rules it. The others, called Perdition, Lower Pit, Sentinel, Silence, death's door and death's shadow door. At every step, the fire is sixty times more intense than at the lower level. It is in these places where angels torture and punish the wicked. The second House is built in the same way and it houses the penitents of Israel. Manasseh ben Hezekiah rules it. The third House is silver and gold. There grows the Tree of Life in the shade of which sit Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs of the twelve tribes, all the Hebrews who came out of Egypt and all the generation of the desert, also King David, his son Solomon so that all the kings of Judah, except Manasseh who is in hell. Moses and Aaron have custody of this House. The fourth House is made of gold (its beams are of olive wood) and it shelters the Righteous whose life has been bitter as the olive yet greens. The fifth House is made of silver, crystal, pure gold and greenhouse. The sixth House houses those who have died fulfilling their duty to God. The seventh House houses those who have died of grief due to the sins of Israel.

Conclusions

Judaism's conception of death balances ritual, theology, and mysticism. Mourning practices continue to evolve, but remain rooted in ancient traditions. The metaphysical depth of Kabbalah, with its multilayered soul theory and eschatological vision, continues to offer insight into the mystery of death. As Hasidic tradition reminds us: "The living close the eyes of the dead; the dead open the eyes of the living". Reflection on suffering, disease and dignity in dying remains an ongoing ethical and theological inquiry.

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