

## THE JEWISH VIEW OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

(*Olam Ha-Ba*, pronounced oh-LAHM hah-BAH, literally "the world to come")

**Editor's Note:** For a number of years Phyllis and I lived in an apartment community where many of our neighbors were Jewish. We grew especially close to an elderly couple who lived down the hall from our eighth floor apartment. One day as I exited the elevator, Ada met me and asked, "Roger, do we (Jews) believe in Heaven?" This issue of *Heart's Desire* addresses a subject about which even Jews, like Ada, are uncertain.

—RLW

**PERHAPS...** the best one-word description of rabbinical teaching on, and Jewish understanding of, the subject is, vague. Certain general ideas are rather widely held, while specific details are sparse and vary greatly within Judaism.

### IN GENERAL

▶ Most Jews agree that there is some kind of life after death, based upon a limited number of Old Testament Scripture references (Job 19:25–26; Psalm 16:9–11; Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2), but even more the result of a belief in an almighty God who is just, necessitating a world beyond this one, a world where He will make things right and correct the ills and injustices of this present world.



Jewish Graves on The Mount of Olives, Jerusalem

▶ Most Jews believe that our focus should be upon this life—and how we can make it better for ourselves and others—rather than on the next (*Tikkun Olam*, "perfection of the world," see *Heart's Desire* 9:2). They point out that an obsession with the afterlife sometimes leads to atrocities like the Spanish Inquisition (justifying torture of the mortal body so that the immortal soul might be saved), and often leads to neglect of one's earthly humanitarian duties (being so "heavenly-minded" that one is no "earthly good"). This is why the subject of the afterlife is rarely discussed in Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox Jewish circles.

▶ Most Jews maintain that we should leave the matter of the afterlife in God's hands, including the issue of who goes where after death. Consequently, Jews do not distinguish between Jews and non-Jews regarding life after death, but rather between the just and unjust, the devout and profane, the good and bad. This thought is evident in the traditional prayer (*Bracha*) recited at a Jewish funeral: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, Master of the universe, the true Judge."

### SPECIFICALLY

▶ There is considerable variety in Jewish opinions regarding the resurrection of the body, as there was in Jesus' day when the Pharisees taught the resurrection of the dead and the Sadducees held the view that there will be no bodily resurrection (Matthew 22:23). There is even a small segment of Judaism (mostly adherents to Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism) which holds the view of transmigration of the soul (reincarnation).

▶ Whether a Jew believes in bodily resurrection, or not, there is the nearly universally held view that man bears

the divine image in his body. Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein writes, “When God breathed a divine soul of life into man’s body, it was transformed from mere matter into a holy vessel bearing the image of God.” (*What You Should Know About Jews and Judaism*, 156) This conviction underlies the doctrine of *kibbud hamet* (“honoring the dead”) and is at the heart of all Jewish laws related to burial (see *Heart’s Desire* 4:4).

› Some Jews believe that when the Messiah appears there will be a resurrection of the dead and that the bodies of those who lived a pious life will roll underground to the Holy Land to be resurrected and accompany *Moshiach* (Messiah) when he enters Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. This explains why many

Jews are buried with a small packet of soil from Israel in the casket and why thousands of Jews from all over the world arrange to be buried on the Mount of Olives (to beat the rush!), as depicted in the photograph.

### SO THEN

› The Jewish view of the afterlife precludes assurance of salvation or certainty of a heavenly home, which might also explain a reticence to think or talk about life after death.

› The New Testament stands in pronounced contrast to rabbinical Judaism in its clear statements regarding Heaven, the resurrection of the dead, and assurance of salvation. (2 Corinthians 5:1–8; Philippians 1:23–24; 1 Corinthians 15:22; John 14:1–6; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18)

## CAN I GET THAT WITH CHOPSTICKS?

It is a well established fact that Jewish people love Chinese food, a seemingly unlikely connection, but one acknowledged in Nonna Gorilovskaya’s humorous introduction to her interview with food writer and restaurant critic, Andrew Coe, in the November/December 2009 issue of the Jewish magazine, *Moment*.



Twas the night before Christmas  
and there was hardly a sound,  
as Jews jumped in their cars  
and drove to Chinatown.  
Their orders were given to waiters with care,  
in hopes that wonton soup  
soon would be there.

The children finished their noodles  
and nestled in their beds,  
while visions of fortune cookies  
danced in their heads.  
Now, *Moment* takes an inquiring look,  
at how this love affair  
with Chinese food took.

Coe lists four reasons for this bagel-egg roll companionship:

1. In the early nineteen hundreds, sons and daughters of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe first ventured outside their very tight ethnic community in New York’s Lower East Side by visiting the “exotic” restaurants of New York’s Chinatown.
2. Many New York restaurants discriminated against Jews and refused to serve them, while proprietors of Chinese restaurants welcomed everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity (probably due to their own horrific experience with bigotry).
3. Most Chinese restaurants are open 365 days a year, including Christmas, when other restaurants are closed.
4. Chinese cooking is vegetable-based, rather than meat or dairy-based, making it much more compatible with kosher dietary laws. And the rest is history!!!

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