

DEATH AND ITS MAGNIFICENCE

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Judaism has a different perceived vision of death than other religions. A traditional Jewish belief is that we go to a state of Gehinom where we are judged on the life we lived before being released into something beyond. As nobody has come back to say what life after death is truly like, we may really never know what is on the other side. But, trying to explain how we think about this subject is going to take more than the eight pages I'm allowed, so I want to think about this concept in a narrower approach. A major question I want to explore is how my limited belief in a higher power lines up with Judaism's views on death and how we as a people feel about an afterlife.

Growing up, I've always felt like there was some sort of afterlife waiting for us. When I had my first conversation regarding issues such as death in Judaism, I was surprised that we didn't believe in a place we all go when we die on earth. Maybe my hesitance to believe this concept stems from my lack of believing in a higher power above us.

A memory regarding death that has stayed with me was when I attended my great-aunt's funeral this past fall. This was my first Jewish funeral that I've attended in memory. While I was there, I felt this weird sensation. I felt this way because of how this was really the first Jewish funeral that I can remember. We were close, but at the same time I could shed no tears at her death. But the memory of it is still carried within me to this day.

My view of death is interesting. Unlike many people, I don't fear death. I understand the reality of death, and one day we are not going to be in this place anymore. Nevertheless, this funeral gave me some sense of comfort about what happens when we pass away. The memory of each family member shoveling dirt into the grave gives me the feeling that we are shoveling parts of ourselves onto the casket in order to be with the person as they travel away and was something that stayed with me. On the outside, it can be seen as helping move the funeral on, but on the inside, the act of shoveling earth into someone's grave, especially at a Jewish funeral, symbolizes much more. When we shovel dirt into the grave, we are including part of ourselves. This act in my opinion is similar to placing stones on the graves of the deceased after a funeral.

Perhaps the concept of death in Judaism focuses on leaving part of ourselves with the deceased so they won't feel lonely.

Throughout my life, I've always had a limited belief in a higher power. If there were a physical being who could control all, why would it allow all strife and struggle in the world? Why would it allow people to destroy themselves and others through mental illness, through gun violence, and why would it allow people to die painful deaths through illnesses and cancer? After years of seeing people go through these ailments and have lives taken apart by war, I can't see how "God's plan" would explain all of this. Because of this distrust, my view of a higher being is limited, and that reflects on some of the religious concepts in Judaism and in other religions.

But these views do conflict with one another. While I look at things from a scientific perspective in general, I believe in some faith-based concepts. I do think karma exists, but I don't think a being is in charge of registering who deserves bad or good karma. I believe that a life-force is in charge of governing all interactions and all actions we do on earth. But even with this concept in my mind, as of recently, the notion of death in Judaism has sparked a different look into a belief in a higher being. But at the same time, how can a being judge whether it's time for someone to die or not to die?

And then there are other ideas in which Judaism challenges death and how Judaism can challenge science itself in life after death. For instance, Jewish custom tells us that we must be buried whole without any desecration of the body, for example, by tattoos. Other customs include not being embalmed after death, or being cremated. I think that why these other acts are discouraged is because Judaism prefers to look at the reality of death. Science dictates how we decompose after we die, and depending on how we die, embalming serves to preserve us, which is discouraged by Jewish law. Judaism encourages us to follow the route of natural decomposition. Judaism discourages these acts because, the customs emphasize the reality of death. To understand the reality, we may be forced to look at the body once it has died in order to accept death and be able to move on from the emotions that come with a loss, even though traditionally, Jewish funerals require a closed casket.

On the other side, science has challenged the ideas of Judaism. In these matters, we have progressed in such a manner that we can have our bodies preserved forever in cryogenesis, or be

able to live longer with artificial implant. As we adapt, will Judaism change itself in order to match our progress in science? As we try to prolong life through medicine, is there a being who is able to see our lives extended and will do something about it? Or does science have the ability to go around this deity or religion?

Humans view death as a scary event in our lives. Many of us do fear it. But I feel as though Judaism provides us a way to get over the fear of death through reality. Judaism, through its customs and traditions allows us to view death in a way that is final, but at the same time gives us closure. For instance, our traditions of not embalming and throwing earth on the coffin as it is being lowered further the idea that we as Jews want death to be natural as possible. Traditions and customs like these are able to give Jews a different insight into death. We learn that death is where life ends, and whatever happens after that happens. We can't control it, we can't change it, we can only accept what happens when we take our last breath. The funeral that I experienced was able to teach me these lessons regarding Judaism and death.