Rashi teaches that the wicked even during life are called dead, while the righteous even while dead are called alive. (Rashi, Breishit 100)

“Though vanished from bodily sight, they have not ceased to be; they abide in the shadow of the Most High.” [Union Prayer Book I]

“The dust returns to the earth, the spirit lives on with God’s eternal years. Like the stars by day, our beloved dead are not seen with mortal eyes, but they shine on in the untroubled firmament of endless times.” [Union Prayer Book I]

“The departed whom we now remember have entered into the peace of life eternal. They still live on earth in the acts of goodness they performed and in the hearts of those who cherish their memory. May the beauty of their life abide among us as a loving benediction.” [Union Prayer Book]

“You are forever mighty, A-do-nai; You revive the dead…. Blessed are you A-do-nai, who revives the dead.” [Mishkan T’filah]

**What is Soul?**

The Torah describes very clearly when the first human was created, it says: “God formed Adam out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the *neshamah* of life; and Adam thus became a living creature.” (Genesis 2:7)

**Hebrew for “breath” or “soul” = *nefesh*, *ruach*, *neshamah***

“The image of breath conveys the idea that soul is intangible, animates life, and links us to the source of creation.” (p. 23) “The image of soul as breath helps convey a paradox. Although we don’t normally see our breath, if we take a mirror, breathe in deeply, and exhale, we can see our breath as a film on the mirror. The more breath we see, the less reflection we see of ourselves.” (p. 24)

There are other related ways of looking at the soul. In the Babylonian Talmud, we are taught:  
“As God fills the whole world, so also the soul fills the whole body. As God sees, but cannot be seen, so also the soul sees, but cannot be seen. As God nourishes the whole world, so also the soul nourishes the whole body. As God is pure, so also the soul is pure. As God dwells in the innermost part of the Universe, so also the soul dwells in the innermost part of the body.” (p. 24)

In *Zohar* (the main book concerning the secrets of Jewish mysticism, called Kabbalah), soul is often described with the imagery of a flame or divine spark. The soul possesses qualities of light. It is pure and the tool of awareness or enlightenment. Like a flame has nestled bands of color, the soul has complementary, nestled qualities. According to *Zohar*, these qualities are the *Nefesh*, *Neshamah*, and *Ruach*.

*Nefesh* is the most primary level of human existence and represents the realm of action and physical pleasure.

*Ruach* is the realm of feelings, which enables personality and the expression of love. It is said that animals, too, have *Nefesh* and *Ruach* – so they have a physical and a personality component, but not the highest dimensions of what soul is within humans.

The *Neshamah* reflects uniquely human capacities, such as analytic thought, and the quest for meaning.

In another mystical tradition, by Isaac Luria, he adds two higher realms of the soul: the *chayah* and the *yechidah*. They are accessed by intuition or disciplined imagination. Sometimes they are considered “spirit” and are differentiated from the lower three levels which are considered “soul.” He taught that the three lower facets of the soul were identified with the personality of the individual and the upper two facets of the spirit were extensions of God and were universal to humans.

Hassidim taught that each person achieves these levels in stages: when a person is born, they have only a soul or *nefesh;* when the person overcomes the inclination to make evil decisions, the person is given a *ruach,* and at that point, the entire world of angels is in their domain. If the person is even more worthy and learns to master emotions, they are given a *neshamah*, corresponding to God’s throne. That means that every intent and thought creates a throne for God. A person at this level then thinks about their love for God and then is placed in the Universe of Love. The person should never remove his thoughts from God, even for an instant, for God rests in his thoughts.” (p. 27)

Judaism in rabbinic and mystical texts emphasizes that we shape, cultivate, and elevate our soul by both our compassionate and ritual acts. We engage the entire chain of soul when we perform deeds with focused, unselfconscious action coupled with an awareness of the ultimate import of our deeds.

In Torah, it is hard to find any specific information that shows a distinction between body and soul. The rabbis in the Talmud differed on whether a soul can exist without a body. After the Talmudic period, most rabbis accepted that the soul lives on and only the body dies.

The soul is the part that is created in God’s image, according to this belief. Perhaps that is why it can be eternal. Part of Western thought concerning the soul as distinct from the body has been influenced by Greek philosophy. For example, Plato taught that the soul is the “real” person, and only the body dies – the soul is the essence of human “immortality.” In Judaism, the soul isn’t immortal because of its nature, but rather the soul is eternal because G-d created it to be eternal.

Our soul develops and changes according to influences from the body. The rabbis said it was like a flask that contained wine – the wine can stain the flask and the flask can influence the taste of the wine. The body and the soul influence each other in a similar way.

**Survival of the Soul: Judaism’s views**

Torah doesn’t tell us much about what happens after we die. There is a midrash from the first century C.E. Talmudists, in which people ask Moses “Tell us what goodness the Holy Blessed One will give us in the World to Come?” Moses responds, “I do not know what I can tell you. Happy are you for what is prepared for you.” (p. 42)

In *Pirkei Avot* (also known as the Ethics of the Ancestors), Rabbi Yaakov is quoted as saying: “This world is like a passageway before the world to come. Prepare yourself so that you might enter into the main banquet room.”

When the rabbis of the Talmud offer a description of the world to come, it sounds very different than our current lives, as in this quote from the Babylonian Talmud:

“In the World to Come there is no eating or drinking, nor procreation or commerce, nor jealousy or enmity, or rivalry – but the righteous sit with crowns on their heads and enjoy the radiance of the *Shekhinah* (which is God’s divine spirit).”

**Telepathy: A Window on the Soul’s Survival**when someone seems to get messages or feel the presence of those who have died  
 Dead sending messages?  
 Coincidence? Hope? Expectation?  
 Consistent pattern of love, death, knowledge that transcends the five senses.

**Near Death Experiences**when someone is declared clinically dead, but is brought back  
 Greeted into the light by those who have already died  
 Vivid descriptions from out of body experiences of visited places  
 Visual accounts from blind people  
 Previous Life Regression under hypnosis describe NDE from former lives

Resurrection: In Hebrew Scriptures we are taught that we are created from the dust of the earth and we return to the earth, and we are promised (Isaiah 26 and Daniel 2) that those who sleep in the earth will awaken. There have been two separate doctrines that later merged about what it means to say that God has the power to bring the dead to life. First, at the end of time, bodies will be resurrected from their graves. Second ether is a non-material “something” in every human (soul) which never dies, which departs the body at death and returs to God. Combining the two led to the belief that, at the time of resurrection the soul would be restored to the resurrected body, and that each individual human, with body and soul united as the were on earth, would come before God for judgment. [Death of Death]

Two hundred years before Jesus was born, in Mishnah Sanhedrin, it promises that “All of Israel has a place in the World to Come, but the following have no portion in the World to Come: one who says, ‘There is no resurrection of the dead...”

The concept was placed in the second paragraph of the Amidah – the core worship part of the service. The Reform movement changed the wording from “The One Who Gives life to the dead” to “The One who gives life to all.”

A belief in resurrection was compelling to the Talmudic rabbis for three reasons: It offered a concrete promise of reward and punishment. It promised a revival of the Jewish people as a community – not only individual Jews would be rewarded, but the whole nation would be rewarded. Third, if the body and soul were an integrated whole, and the soul survived then the body would exist in the future too. The rabbis never really resolved which form of our body would be resurrected? Would it be healthy or decrepit? Since bodies obviously decompose, they proposed that there was a specific bone, called the *luz* at the end of the spine that would serve as the nucleus of the body at the time of resurrection. The belief in resurrection in Judaism changed over the years, and eventually faded in importance. Rabbi Spitz says that he does not believe in each individual soul being reconnected with their body. Rather he sees a “future time in which the world will be renewed and reordered and that resurrection will be reflected in a global wholeness.” (p. 54)

Maimonides wrote a Treatise on Resurrection and said that Resurrection doesn’t require proof – like belief in miracles, it must be accepted as a doctrine of faith. He said, “For such a denial leads to the denial of all miracles [chronicled in the Torah], and the denial of miracles is equivalent to denying the existence of God and abandonment of our faith. For we do consider the resurrecton of the dead to be a cardinal principle of the Torah.” [Jewish Views of the Afterlife]

**Past Life Regression:**

There are many stories of people young and old being able to unlock what seem to be past lives that they have lived. When one of my brothers was about 10, he woke up one morning and described his previous family, called the Strawtop family. He proceeded to speak in French, remembering conversations he had in his dream. There are many psychological theories that rely on a kind of hypnosis that allows the client to remember past lives.

**Reincarnation** is a related concept: Kabbalah takes reincarnation for granted. It teaches that the soul can mend the wrongdoings of previous lives and attain further wholeness. Other rabbinic scholars thought of it as “madness and confusion” (Saadiah Gaon p. 83). Among the sources that believed in it, most felt that reincarnation only continues to take human forms. However, some mystics talked about being reincarnated into animals, plants and rocks as a form of spiritual punishment. Most believed that the process allowed for the repair of the soul. Isaac Luria gave examples in the Tanakh of soul repair, such as Jacob sinned when he on his return to Canaan, he bowed down to his brother. But Mordechai repaired Jacob’s soul by not bowing to Haman. It is interesting to note that most recorded cases of reincarnation among Jews find that Jews are reincarnated to be Jews. Most often, men reincarnate as men and women reincarnate as women.

Luria’s concepts did gain some hold in mainstream Judaism. For example, because sleep is considered a kind of “taste of death,” in the bedtime prayers in a traditional prayerbook, as part of the introduction to the Shema, a person would say “Master of the Universe, I hereby forgive anyone who angered or antagonized me… whether in this transmigration (*gilgul*) or another transmigration.” (p. 94) In the Hassidic tradition, the rebbe had powers to be able to see into past lives, and be able to help individuals with *tikkun* – repairing their soul.

**Psychics and Mediums:** The Torah specifically forbids consulting with familiar spirits or with people who consult with the spirits. And yet, there are a number of cases in the Tanakh in which people do consult with the dead. In about the thirteenth century the rabbis officially interpreted the Torah text to say that the prohibition was only against consulting with the body of the dead, but calling on the spirit was allowed, because the spirit is not dead. Some rabbis disagreed and said that body and soul are inseparable. (p. 106) Later still the rabbis felt that consulting with the dead in pagan-like ways was forbidden, but calling upon the dead with holy names and other specifically Jewish processes was acceptable.

Like on Yom Kippur, there is a common belief historically among the rabbis that when a person dies, the soul is brought before God and an accounting of all of the person’s deeds are brought up. A Midrash says:

When a righteous person arrives at the end of his days, his recording angels precede him into heaven singing his praises… But when a wicked person dies, one who did not bring himself to turn in repentance to God, the Holy Blessed One says: “Let your soul be blasted in despair! How many times did I call upon you to repent and you did not?” (p. 136)

It is one thing to say that a person who dies lives on in the hearts of those who cherish their memories. It is another thing for us to admit that the soul does indeed live on as a separate entity. How does believing in this immortality of the soul affect how we live today? We can recognize that we truly can feel the spirits of those who came before us. We may be able to keep them in our hearts.

Most importantly, knowing that OUR soul will survive, allows us to live more fully in life. We take each day – indeed each moment – and recognize that we are part of a divine process. We become more aware of the other souls around us, and by caring for them, elevate our spirits. Some people will say that since each of our souls is a light and in a sense a part of the universal light, perhaps we don’t need to be Jewish at all to fulfill our soul’s role. Rabbi Spitz gives the analogy that some people may love to travel, and therefore live in hotels their whole life. Although a house limits mobility, it also provides a constancy of space that allows us to assert our identity more fully and invest more deeply in friendships and community. We can still learn about other cultures and religions and people, and integrate the learning into our lives, but having a home base is a wonderful thing.

**NEXT: The Afterlife Journey of the Soul and What does understanding about the soul after death tell us about life?**

**Sources:**

The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought by Neil Gillman

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The Path of the Soul: Making Peace with Mortality by Rabbi Ben Kamin

What Happens After I Die? Jewish Views of Life After Death by Rifat Sonsino and Daniel B. Syme