

Weekly Column by

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Life after Life

"And when Yaakov made an end of charging his sons, he gathered up his feet into the bed, and expired, and was gathered unto his people" (B'reishit 49:33).

Death in the Bible is described as "the way of all the earth" (Yehoshua 23:14; M'lachim Alef 2:2). If a person knows when he is about to die he can set his affairs in order, bid farewell to his dear ones, and make peace with God. In the Jewish tradition, to recite the confession of sins (vidui) before death is considered especially meritorious. The word "expired" in the text, say the commentators, is used only of the righteous and implies death in a moment without pain or delay.

The phrase "and was gathered to his people", used of the death of all three patriarchs, is certainly more than simply a delicate way of describing death, however beautiful the phrase is in itself. It implies being taken to the realms of eternal life where the souls of one's ancestors lie in repose. The Biblical phrase "may his soul be bound up in the bundle of life" (Shmuel Alef 25:29) has long been understood in a similar sense, and to this day it is used in memorial prayers and inscriptions on tombstones. How can the words "and was gathered unto his people" be used of Avraham,

however, since, being the first Hebrew, he had no Hebrew ancestors to whom he could be gathered? S'forno explains that he was gathered into the bond of eternal life together with the righteous of all generations who, being like him in that respect, were his people.

The Talmud says that the patriarch Yaakov is not dead (Ta'anit 5b). Obviously, they were not referring to his physical existence but rather to his spirit which lives on after him. Even in this life, death is not usually final. A person continues to live physically in his children and grandchildren, in the inspiration he leaves his loved ones and in his influence upon society. Judaism teaches that death is but the beginning of a higher existence where one is freed from the limitations of one's bodily frame. The nine months in the womb are the period of gestation preceding earthly birth, while the 70, 80, or 90 years and more on earth are the gestation period before heavenly birth. Just as an apple falls from the tree when it is fully ripe, so does the soul sever itself from the body when it has achieved its highest potential on earth; it then returns to God.

In a harbor, two ships sailed: one setting forth on a voyage, the other coming home to port. Everyone cheered the ship going out, but the ship sailing in was scarcely noticed. Seeing this, a wise man said: "Do not rejoice over a ship setting out to sea, for you cannot know what terrible storms it may encounter

and what fearful danger it may have to endure. Rejoice rather over the ship that has safely reached port and brings its passengers home in peace" (Kohelet Rabba 7:4).

The person who leads his life knowing that he must give an account of it before his Maker at the end of his earthly days, has a powerful and constant incentive to live his life halachically - to bring the ship's passengers home in peace, so to speak. The Talmud compares this world to Erev Shabbat, and the World to Come to Shabbat. Only those who prepare in this world (Erev Shabbat) can hope to enjoy eternal bliss in the World to Come (Shabbat). What a person does with his life on earth has eternal significance.

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