

A man dies and goes to heaven. For a little while he stands outside of heaven's gates, with the others, waiting to see if his name will be called, or if he will be one of those assigned to the place below. After a while, Gavriel, the angel who is in charge of the gates of heaven, steps forward and calls his name. With a great sigh of relief, he approaches the gates. Gavriel says, "You may enter."

"Thank you, my Lord," says the man, "but if it pleases my Lord, I would like to know if it is possible that you might tell me about the place below, so that I would know enough to appreciate my life in heaven."

"Certainly," Gavriel replied. "Hell is a bit like a fancy nightclub. There are dancing girls, great food and loud music. It's hot, but the food is good, the girls are beautiful, and the music enchanting. You can stay at the table as long as you wish, watch the show, and no one will ever bring you a bill."

"Are you sure?" says the man. "That's not what I had heard about it."

"Oh I'm sure," says Gavriel...would you like to go and have a look?"

"Well, maybe...just a brief look...just to see what it might be like. Are you sure that's ok?"

"Oh yes, we get this request quite often, more than you would think...Just go down the hall and take the elevator on the left. When the door opens, push the bottom button, and step as far back from the doors as possible. When the door opens again, have a look around, but don't step out, or you will not be able to return."

So the man goes down the hall, and takes the elevator on the left. When the door opens, he pushes the bottom button, steps all the way back into the elevator, the doors close, and the elevator goes down, down, down to the very bottom, and then the doors open. Whoosh!! A blast of freezing cold air enters the elevator. The man steps cautiously toward the front of the elevator and looks out the door. As far as he can see, there is snow and ice...it looks like the tundra, a vast wasteland of freezing cold. So quickly he pushes the button for the door to close, pushes the top button and steps all the way to the back, and the elevator returns to heaven.

"It was not at all as you described it," he tells Gavriel.

"Oh, really?"

“Yes...I did exactly as you told me...I went down the hall, and took the elevator on the left. When the door opened, I pushed the bottom button, stepped all the way back into the elevator, and waited for the doors to close. Down, down, down to the very bottom, and then the doors opened. And...whoosh!! A blast of freezing cold air entered the elevator. I stepped cautiously toward the front of the elevator and looked out the door. As far as I could see, there was snow and ice...it looked like the tundra, a vast wasteland of freezing cold.”

“Couldn’t be,” says Gavriel. “Are you sure you took the one on the left, and that you followed by instructions exactly? Perhaps you should try again.”

So the man goes down the hall a second time, and for the second time, he takes the elevator on the left. When the door opens, he pushes the bottom button, steps all the way back into the elevator, the doors close, and the elevator goes down, down, down to the very bottom, and then the doors open. Whoosh!! Once again a blast of freezing cold air enters the elevator. Again the man steps cautiously toward the front of the elevator and looks out the door. As far as he can see, there is snow and ice...it looks like the tundra, a vast wasteland of freezing cold. So again he pushes the button for the door to close, pushes the top button and steps all the way to the back, and the elevator returns to heaven.

“The same as last time...freezing cold, snow and ice,” he says.

“Can’t be,” says Gavriel. This time I am going with you.”

So this time they go together, down the hall and they take the elevator on the left. When the door opens, this time Gavriel himself pushes the bottom button, they step all the way back into the elevator, the doors close, and the elevator goes down, down, down to the very bottom, and then the doors open. Whoosh!! A blast of freezing cold air enters the elevator. This time it is Gavriel who steps cautiously toward the front of the elevator and looks out the door. As far as he can see, there is snow and ice...it looks like the tundra, a vast wasteland of freezing cold.

“I don’t believe it,” Gavriel cries out. “The Raiders have finally won another Super Bowl!”

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Stories of the afterlife have always been fascinating to Jews, in part because we have no singular, succinct and clear understanding of what happens after we die. There has been more written on the afterlife, in rabbinic and post-rabbinic literature, than perhaps any

other subject. Because we are a People who demand proof, and since no one has died and returned to us to share the experience, there is only speculation and opinion about the afterlife, and no one is better at speculating and giving their opinions than we are.

The earliest Biblical accounts suggest that our idea of the afterlife was a kind of eternal gathering place in which we would be united with our kinfolk. Abraham purchases the cave of Machpelah as the burial place for his family, and each generation is buried there. The Torah says, “And he died and was gathered to his kin.”

Then, in the Rabbinic Period, as our afterlife ideas evolve and are strongly influenced by the Christian beliefs of the lands in which we were living, we find the first suggestion that if one dies after a life of unrepentant sin, the afterlife destination is beneath the surface of the earth in the netherworld, which the rabbis called “gehenom”. But that one who dies in good stead will go above the earth to heaven, as with Moses who dies “at the top of the mountain.”

By the Middle Ages, the afterlife has a more neutral and non-directioned description, simply referred to as “Olam Ha-Ba” (“The World-to-Come”). But there is judgment involved, and one’s portion in the world-to-come is determined by one’s behaviour in this world. In some sources, the world-to-come is also the place where the scales of justice are balanced with reward or punishment that was not apparent in this life, so that good people who suffer or bad people who profit in this world will find compensation or retribution in the next world.

And the great tzaddikim, those who led the community by living exemplary lives of goodness and piety, they were rewarded with a heavenly abode. Some were even believed to have the ability to rise to heaven and return at will. The rabbi of Nemirov, in the famous story by Itzhak Leib Peretz, disappeared each year on Yom Kippur and went missing from the synagogue. The people believed that he ascended to heaven to be with God on that day. And when it turned out that he had simply gone out, dressed as a woodsman, to chop wood and take it to the home of an elderly woman, the townsfolk revised their thinking, asserting that he had not gone to heaven, but “even higher”.

For those who subscribe to even more mystical ideologies, the kabbalists put forth the notion of “gilgul ha-nefesh”, or reincarnation, in which the souls of the deceased are returned to earthly life in a new body until they have performed all of the mitzvot, which was understood to be the path to achievement of a complete atonement with God. Although reincarnation never became a mainstream Jewish belief, it is a legitimate minority position in Jewish thought.

On this evening of Kol Nidre, judgment, reward and punishment, and atonement are foremost in our thoughts. I look around the congregation, and I see that many of you are wearing tallitot, on this, the only evening of the year on which one wears a tallit. You know, the reason that a tallit is not worn on any other evening is because, in the evening, you cannot see the “techelet”, the blueish-coloured strand of the “tzitzit” that reminds us to do the mitzvot.

On Kol Nidre, we wear the tallit, not as a reminder of the mitzvot, but as a “kittel”, symbolic of the shroud in which we will one day be buried...because we are here tonight to receive our judgment, as though the Gates of Repentance were the very Gates of Heaven.

So you can imagine how, when thinking about all of this, I became interested in a book by David Eagleman, published a year or so ago by Pantheon Books in New York, entitled “Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives.” Out of Eagleman’s imagination come forty vignettes, each one offering a different set of ideas about what happens after we die.

In the vignette that lends its name to the book, Eagleman offers a picture of the afterlife, a world in which all of the varied experiences of our lives are grouped together and we relive them in a reshuffled order, with the sum total of the events of a particular kind replayed at once, before we go on to the next experience. Two months driving on the street in front of our house, and then thirty years of sleep before waking and opening our eyes. Fifteen months looking for lost items, eighteen months waiting in line. One year reading books. Two days telling lies. Seventy-seven hours of confusion. All of the pain at once, followed by all of the joys. Fifty-one days deciding what to wear. Eighteen days staring into the refrigerator. Six months watching commercials...you get the idea.

In another vignette, the afterlife is spent thinking about what makes people stick together. Why do some relationships work well, while others fail? Why is it that some people are held together by circumstance and others by obligation? How is it that there are some of us who cannot live without being connected to another individual or community, while others don’t seem to need it at all, and that there are still others who fight against, or sabotage their relationships?

Re-living our experiences and reviewing our relationships is a part of the work of Yom Kippur. It is difficult work. It is awesome and full of dread. The work of Yom Kippur takes great strength and courage, and the will to see ourselves and be open to change. Revisiting our pain and our joy, and re-establishing a healthy mix of the two. Re-evaluating our relationships and learning to identify those we are stuck in, stuck upon or stuck with.

But I know that it is necessary for me, to judge myself and be judged, in order to be cleansed for the year ahead and in order to be at one with my Creator.

There is one more vignette that, in particular, I would like to share with you in its entirety...this one entitled, “Subjunctive”.

“In the afterlife you are judged not against other people, but against yourself. Specifically, you are judged against what you could have been. So the afterworld is much like the present world, but it now includes all the yous that could have been. In an elevator you might meet more successful versions of yourself, perhaps the you that chose to leave your

hometown three years earlier, or the you who happened to board an airplane next to a company president who then hired you. As you meet these yous, you experience a pride of the sort you feel for a successful cousin: although the accomplishments don't directly belong to you, it somehow feels close.

But soon you fall victim to intimidation. These yous are not really you, they are better than you. They made smarter choices, worked harder, invested the extra effort into pushing on closed doors. These doors eventually broke open for them and allowed their lives to splash out in colorful new directions. Such success cannot be explained away by a better genetic hand; instead, they played your cards better. In their parallel lives, they made better decisions, avoided moral lapses, did not give up on love so easily. They worked harder than you did to correct their mistakes and apologized more often.

Eventually you cannot stand hanging around these better yous. You discover you've never felt more competitive with anyone in your life.

You try to mingle with the lesser yous, but it doesn't assuage the sting. In truth, you have little sympathy for these less significant yous and more than a little haughtiness about their indolence. 'If you had quit watching TV and gotten off the couch you wouldn't be in this situation,' you tell them, when you bother to interact with them at all.

But the better yous are always in your face in the afterlife. In the bookstore you'll see one of them arm in arm with the affectionate woman whom you let slip away. Another you is browsing the shelves, running his fingers over the book he actually finished writing. And look at this one jogging past outside: he's got a much better body than yours, thanks to a consistency at the gym that you never kept up.

Eventually you sink into a defensive posture, seeking reasons why you would not want to be so well behaved and virtuous in any case. You grudgingly befriend some of the lesser yous and go drinking with them. Even at the bar you see the better yous, buying rounds for their friends, celebrating their latest good choice.

And thus your punishment is cleverly and automatically regulated in the afterlife: the more you fall short of your potential, the more of these annoying selves you are forced to deal with."

There is something inherently Jewish about this version of the afterlife, for it challenges us with the task that is before on this Day of Atonement, the task that begins on this Kol Nidre. On this day we are not judged in relation to those around us. On this day we are judged against ourselves. Have we measured up to our potential? Have we been all that

we could be? When we look into the mirror of our souls, do we see one of the lesser us', and are we content to hang out with our lesser selves? Or will we have the courage to judge ourselves severely, and commit to make the changes that will lead us to be better us' in the year ahead?

Our tradition teaches that we are not required to be as good as our neighbour, but only that we be the best that we can be. We need not look around us to the left or to the right. We need only to find the strength and the courage to look within. A well-known story about one of the early Hassidic masters illustrates this teaching:

The students of Reb Zusya, hearing that their teacher was about to die, came to pay him one last visit. But entering the room, they were surprised to see him trembling with fear. "Why are you afraid of death?" they asked. "In your life, have you not been as righteous as Moses himself?" "When I stand before the throne of judgment," Zusya answered, "I will not be asked, 'Reb Zusya, why were you not like Moses?' I will be asked, 'Reb Zusya, why were you not like Zusya?'"

Each of us must strive to be the best "me" possible. That is the way that a Jew measures the worth of his life. And this is the hour in which we are called upon to engage in the task.

May God be with us throughout this day, holding open the Gates of Repentance, calling to us in love and waiting with grace and compassion for us to enter.

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