

# Big Questions in Jewish Spirituality

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UNIT 7



## UNIT 7

# What Happens After Death?

## Unit Objectives

### Students will be able to:

- Explain that there are Jewish traditions pertaining to what happens to the body and to the soul after death.
- Describe some basic Jewish mourning rituals and how they are meant to address both the needs of the departed and those who are mourning.
- Identify, define, and explain the following terms: *techiyat hametim*, *olam haba*, and *gilgul nefashot*.
- Reflect on the possible implications of these terms regarding how to lead a more meaningful life.

## NOTES:

- While many teens have not yet encountered loss of a loved one, it is likely that some of your students have. It is important to be sensitive to their thoughts and feelings about death and to keep conversations general. Additionally, some teens naturally think about death more than others, and it is important to be aware of these tendencies. Some students may share morbid thoughts, others may feel uncomfortable talking about death in the first place. If you are unsure about a student's expression of their thoughts/feelings, please consider consulting with someone in the school who is in a position to better understand the student, such as a guidance counselor.
- Due to the delicate and intense nature of this topic, the activities in this unit are traditional and desk-based. Try to build in extra processing and reflection time.
- This unit mentions, but does not delve deep into, the rituals around death and dying. Many schools have Jewish Life Cycle units/courses to explore these ideas. If your school does not offer a course like this and you would like to explore these ideas further, reach out to a local chaplain, rabbi, or *Chevra Kadisha* or read through available Jewish life cycle curricula.

## Introductory Essay

*This essay, for the teacher, is meant to provide some context and walk the teacher through the main ideas in this unit.*

While much of Jewish life and thought focuses predominantly on earthly concerns and the covenant between God and the Jewish people during our lifetimes, Jewish tradition also recognizes and confronts the reality of death. Over thousands of years, and in Jewish communities around the globe, diverse perspectives on the afterlife have emerged, reflecting the depth and complexity of Jewish spirituality.

Jewish traditions relate to the experience of death from multiple angles—both from the perspective of the deceased and the living. That is to say, there are traditions that speak to the care which is given to the body and soul of the deceased, and a body of law dedicated to the comforting and consoling of mourners.

The notion of the *olam haba* (the world to come) is a central tenet of Jewish spirituality. *Olam haba* is a realm of spiritual existence that awaits the righteous after death. The Talmud elaborates on its nature. It takes it as a given that all of Israel has a share in the world to come and describes it as a realm where the righteous will enjoy the presence of God, engage in Torah study, and experience unimaginable (non-physical) pleasures. The wicked, on the other hand, will endure various forms of punishment commensurate with their sins until they are ready to enter *olam haba*. Some thinkers use the name *Gan Eden*, the idyllic world once inhabited by Adam and Chava, to refer to this spiritual realm.

Jewish texts, particularly Kabbala, offers profound and intricate perspectives on the afterlife. According to Kabbala, the soul is a spark of the Divine which resides in the confines of the physical world. Death allows it to ascend to its heavenly abode. Kabbalists describe the afterlife as a journey through various spiritual realms, each bringing the soul closer to the Divine. The ultimate goal of this journey is to achieve reunification with the *Ein Sof*, the infinite and unknowable source of all existence.

A related idea is the concept of *gilgul nefashot* (reincarnation). According to the Kabbala, if someone has not managed to complete the 613 *mitzvot*, the soul reincarnates, providing an opportunity for improvement and spiritual development. This cycle continues until the soul has attained a state of perfection and is ready for its final ascent to the Divine realm.

Another critical topic in Jewish eschatology is *Mashiach*. *Mashiach* will be explored in the next unit, but it is important to note here that *Mashiach* is often associated with the resurrection of the dead. According to rabbinic teachings, when *Mashiach* arrives, the righteous will be resurrected to eternal life in the world to come, while the wicked will be resurrected to face judgment and punishment. The establishment of the Messianic Age is also referred to as *olam haba*.

The resurrection of the dead is a powerful symbol of God's sovereignty over life and death and His promise of ultimate justice and redemption. It offers hope and comfort to those who mourn the loss of loved ones and reinforces the belief in the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

Jewish teachings on the afterlife provide a framework for understanding the ultimate destiny of humankind and the purpose of life. While the exact nature of the afterlife remains a mystery, exploring these ideas can help students reflect on and pursue a more meaningful life.

## Key Ideas

*These are the key ideas of the unit. This list can be used to ensure that all the key ideas are covered over the course of the lessons.*

- Jewish thought places tremendous value on living a meaningful life, but also accepts the realities of mortality.
- There are varying and sometime conflicting Jewish traditions regarding “what happens after death” or eschatology.
- Jewish tradition maintains that the soul continues after it departs the body.
- Once a soul has departed from its human body, it begins the journey to reconnect with the Creator. There are different conceptions of how this journey takes place, including resurrection and reincarnation.
- Jewish ritual around death and mourning address both the needs of the mourners and the importance of respecting the deceased.

## Important Terms

*These are terms that may come up in classroom discussions. It is important to have definitions on hand and to make sure that the teacher and students are talking about the same thing.*

- **Olam Haba** – literally “the world to come,” refers to the afterlife or the Messianic era. It encompasses the ultimate reward for the righteous, a time of spiritual fulfillment, and Divine presence following the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment.
- **Gilgul Nefashot** – a Kabbalistic term referring to the reincarnation of souls. It posits that souls undergo multiple lifetimes to achieve spiritual correction and growth, ultimately reaching a state of perfection.
- **Techiyat Hametim** – literally “resurrection of the dead,” this is a fundamental belief in Jewish eschatology, asserting that the dead will be resurrected in the Messianic age. It is considered part of the ultimate redemption, where the righteous will be granted eternal life.

## Classroom Activities

*In order to get the most out of this unit, and to help students understand the key ideas, we suggest that teachers complete the classroom activities (unless otherwise indicated) in the order that they appear.*

### Trigger Activity – Question Generation

To jumpstart this unit, ask students to brainstorm a list of questions about the following statement. Make sure to explain that you will not necessarily answer all of the questions.

**“And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”**

*- Kohelet 12:7*

Some questions may include:

- Does Jewish tradition believe in the concepts of Heaven and Hell?
- Is there a difference between *Gan Eden* and *olam haba*?
- What is *olam haba* and does everyone end up there?
- What is supposed to happen with *techiyat hametim*?
- Does Jewish tradition believe in reincarnation?
- What does it mean that the spirit returns to God?
- Why does Jewish tradition put so much emphasis on burial practices?

### **K-W-B Activity/What Happens After Death**

*This activity helps students explore their prior knowledge and harness their curiosity about Jewish conceptions of death and the afterlife.*

Use an existing K-W-B chart, or copy the following framework onto a document to prepare a handout.

K – What I know	W – What I want to know	B – What I believe

## Introduction

If students are unfamiliar with K-W-B charts, introduce them to the activity and hand out the chart for students to complete individually. Highlight the importance of understanding various perspectives within Jewish tradition and how prayers, rituals, and texts have shaped these conceptions.

## Individual Reflection

- a. Ask students to fill out the “Know” section of their chart, writing down what they already know about Jewish conceptions of death and the afterlife. This should be a general brainstorm. It is ok if the students do not know the details of different ideas, and here it is not important for them to distinguish between ideas that they believe and agree with and those they might not.
- b. In the “Want to know” section, students write down questions they have about the topic or aspects they are curious to learn more about.
- c. In the “Believe” sections students can reflect on the different ideas that they have encountered and share to what extent, if any, they identify with or believe the different conceptions.

*Note: not all students will have developed beliefs in this area, and some might not feel comfortable sharing. Emphasize to students that this is about their own reflection and should be without judgment. They do not need to share any of the ideas that they are not comfortable sharing.*

## Chevruta Discussion

- a. Ask students to group themselves in *chevrotot* or small groups.
- b. Each pair/group should share what they wrote in the “Know” and “Want to know” sections, comparing notes and adding any new ideas or questions they gather from their partner/group.
- c. Ask students to reflect on and connect the ideas that have been listed in the “Know” section with prayers they’ve heard, rituals they’ve participated in, or texts they have read that express visions of the afterlife.
- d. Each *chevruta*/group should create a combined list of their knowledge and questions.



## Class-Wide Discussion

Bring the class together to discuss their combined lists, adding any additional thoughts or questions, and compile a comprehensive list of what they know and what they want to know on the whiteboard or a large paper. This list should guide the rest of the unit if possible.

## What Happens to the Body After Death – Guided Discussion

*There are detailed and specific laws and rituals which shape the burial and mourning process in Judaism. These laws and rituals have dual meaning: they are meant to escort the mourner through the process of grieving, and they also are meant to show respect and kindness to the deceased.*

*The following discussion is meant to familiarize students with some of the practices and the reasons behind them, after which we will begin to delve into what happens to the soul after death. You can use some or all of the sources to guide the discussion. For each source you can discuss with the students whether the practices described are meant to comfort the deceased, the mourners, or both. (If your school has covered this content in other units or courses, you can just review key ideas.)*

### Respecting and honoring the dead

**Respecting the body:** Ask students to think back to the definition of *tzelem Elokim* (previous units include definitions) and ask them whether it is referring to the soul or to the body.

#### ***Devarim 21:22-23***

**When a man is legally sentenced to death and executed, you must then hang him on gallows. However, you may not allow his body to remain on the gallows overnight, but you must bury it on the same day.**

#### **Rashi on *Devarim 21:23***

**It is an affront to the King, for man is fashioned in His image, and the Israelites are His children. This is compared to identical twin brothers. One became king, and one was apprehended as a thief and hanged. Everyone who saw him**

exclaimed, "The king has been hanged!" [The king issued a command, and the deceased brother was brought down.] Whenever the word "curse" is used throughout Scripture, it connotes slighting and insult, as in, "He insulted me explicitly."

*Though we usually think of the term soul referring to the part of us which is created in the image of God, it is actually referring to humans in total—both body and soul. The body is deserving of respect and many of the laws pertaining to burial stem from this idea.*

Respecting the feelings of the deceased:

***Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 152a***

**Rabbi Chisda said: A person's soul mourns for him[self] all seven days of *Shiva* [the seven days of mourning]....Rabbi Abahu said: Everything said in front of the deceased is known, until the grave is sealed.**

***Tehillim 115:17***

**The dead cannot praise God, nor those who go down in silence.**

*Chazal indicate that even once the soul has departed the body, the soul still has knowledge of what is happening to the body and how it is being treated and even spoken about, at least until the burial. The second source, from Tehillim, suggests that life in this world is preferable because this is where we are able to praise God and serve Him, whereas once a person dies, they cannot.*

## Laws and Practices

The following is a list of some of the laws and practices following death in Judaism. If students are not familiar with the practice, expand the explanation as required. Ask students if they think the rationale for the practice is about respecting the deceased or about comforting the mourner (or both):

**Aninut** (Immediate Mourning)

- **Definition:** The period from death until burial
- **Practices:** During this time, the immediate family is exempt from (most) positive commandments in order to focus on the *mitzvot* related to arranging the funeral.

**Shmira** (Guarding the Body)

- **Definition:** Someone staying with the body from death until burial
- **Practices:** The tradition of having someone stay with the deceased from the time of death until the burial.

**Tahara** (Purification)

- **Definition:** The ritual washing and preparation of the body for burial
- **Practices:** The *Chevra Kadisha* performs the ritual washing (*tahara*) and dresses the body in simple white shrouds (*tachrichim*).

**Kriah** (Tearing of Garments)

- **Definition:** The tearing of a garment by mourners
- **Practices:** Immediate family members tear a piece of their clothing or wear a torn black ribbon, symbolizing their grief.

**Levayah** (Funeral)

- **Definition:** The funeral service and burial
- **Practices:** This includes the recitation of *Tehillim*, eulogies, and the *El Maleh Rachamim* prayer. The burial is usually done as soon as possible after death.

**Kaddish**

- **Definition:** The Mourner's Prayer
- **Practices:** Reciting the mourner's *Kaddish* during services for eleven months for a parent and thirty days for other relatives.

### **Shiva** (Seven Days of Mourning)

- **Definition:** The first seven days after the burial
- **Practices:** Mourners stay at home and receive visitors, sit on low stools, refrain from work, and recite the *Kaddish*. Mirrors are covered, and mourners often avoid personal grooming.

### **Yahrzeit** (Anniversary of Death)

- **Definition:** The annual commemoration of a loved one's death
- **Practices:** Lighting a *Yahrzeit* candle, reciting *Kaddish*, and possibly studying Torah or performing acts of charity in memory of the deceased.

### **Unveiling**

- **Definition:** The ceremony to unveil the tombstone, typically within the first year after death
- **Practices:** Includes the recitation of prayers, *Tehillim*, and the *Kaddish* at the gravesite.

## **What Happens to the Soul Activity**

*This activity allows students to explore the Jewish perspective on what happens to souls after death. It is an age-appropriate overview of the topic, and therefore does not cover the topic fully. Teachers may choose to highlight all, some, or none of these ideas with their students. Teachers may organize the class in a chevruta jigsaw format, but may also choose to present the ideas in a teacher-led or frontal way.*

### **1. Techiyat Hametim**

*Techiyat hametim* is a foundational idea in Jewish tradition. It appears in daily prayer, but rarely do we pause to consider the idea. The sources below give students a chance to explore it. Ask students to clarify the description of *techiyat hametim* in each source below. Note questions to consider.

**Daniel 12:2**

ורבים מיִשְׁנֵי אֲדַמְת־עֶפֶר יִקְיֻצוּ אֱלֹהֵי לַחֵי עוֹלָם וְאֱלֹהֵי לַחְרָפוֹת לְדָרְאוֹן עוֹלָם:

Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence.

**Yeshayahu 26:19**

יְחִיו מִתֵּיךְ נִבְלָתִי יְקוּמוֹן הַקִּיצוֹ וְרִנְנוֹ שְׁכֵנֵי עֶפֶר כִּי טַל אֹרֶת טַלְךָ וְאֶרֶץ רִפְאִים תְּפִיל:

Oh, let Your dead revive! Let corpses arise! Awake and shout for joy, You who dwell in the dust!—For Your dew is like the dew on fresh growth; You make the land of the shades come to life.

**Yechezkel 37:11-12**

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי בֶּן־אָדָם הֵעֲצָמוֹת הָאֵלֹהֵי כָל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל הֲמָה הֵנָּה אֹמְרִים יָבֹשׁוּ עֲצָמוֹתֵינוּ וְאֶבְדָּה תִקְוַתְנוּ נִגְזְרְנוּ לָנוּ: לִכֵּן הִנָּבֵא וְאָמַרְתְּ אֲלֵיהֶם כֹּה־אָמַר אֲדֹנָי ה' הִנֵּה אֲנִי פֹתֵחַ אֶת־קִבְרוֹתֵיכֶם וְהֵעִלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם מִקִּבְרוֹתֵיכֶם עִמִּי וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל־אֲדַמְת־יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And I was told, "O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed.' Prophecy, therefore, and say to them: Thus said the Lord YKVK: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the land of Israel.

- 1) What symbolic meanings can be derived from the imagery of *tehiyat hametim* (e.g., "sleep in the dust," "dry bones," "dew on fresh growth") in these sources from the navi?
- 2) What do these sources suggest about moral accountability after death? (Pay attention to the possible fates for different groups of people.)

**Sanhedrin 92a**

אמר רבא מניין לתחיית המתים מן התורה שנאמר (דברים לג, ו) יחי ראובן ואל ימות יחי ראובן בעולם הזה ואל ימות לעולם הבא רבינא אמר מהכא (דניאל יב, ב) ורבים מיִשְׁנֵי אֲדַמְת עֶפֶר יִקְיֻצוּ אֱלֹהֵי לַחֵי עוֹלָם וְאֱלֹהֵי לַחְרָפוֹת לְדָרְאוֹן עוֹלָם רב אשי אמר מהכא (דניאל יב, יג) ואתה לך [לקץ] ותנוח ותעמוד לגורלך לקץ הימים.

Rava says: From where is resurrection of the dead derived from the Torah? It is derived from a verse, as it is stated: "Let Reuben live and not die, in that his men become few" (*Devarim* 33:6). This is interpreted: "Let Reuben live" in this world "and not die" in the World-to-Come. Ravina says that resurrection is derived from here: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awaken, some to everlasting life, and some to reproaches and everlasting disgrace" (*Daniel* 12:2). Rav Ashi says proof is derived from here: "But go you your way until the end be; and you shall rest, and arise to your lot at the end of days" (*Daniel* 12:13).

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Ramchal, *Derech Hashem* 1:3:9-10, pp. 51-53

After Adam's mistake, Divine justice decreed that neither man nor the world will ever be able to rise to perfection while still in their current fallen state. Because they remain in this spoiled, non-ideal condition, and evil in the meantime has increased, both man and the world must go through a stage of destruction before either can arrive at perfection. Man must therefore die, and everything else that was corrupted with him also must perish. The soul cannot purify the body until the body dies and deteriorates and a new structure is composed, that the soul can enter and purify... It was therefore decreed that man should die and then be brought back to life. This is the concept known as the Resurrection of the Dead... The true time and place of reward will therefore be after the Resurrection in this renewed world. Man will then enjoy his reward with both body and soul. The body will be purified by the soul, and will therefore also be in a proper state to enjoy that good.

*How does Ramchal describe the necessity of death and resurrection in the process of achieving perfection?*

Overall questions about *techiyat hametim*:

1. How might the concept of resurrection influence Jewish ideas of justice and righteousness during one's lifetime?
2. What do these sources contribute to our understanding of the relationship between body and soul?
3. How does the idea of resurrection contribute to the concept of human

- imperfection and the spiritual journey towards perfection?
4. In what way might these sources, or the topic of resurrection in general be used to provide comfort to mourners or individuals dealing with loss?
  5. What are your thoughts about resurrection?

## 2. *Gilgul Nefashot*

The foundation of reincarnation flows from the idea that man was created with the goal of making himself worthy of God's goodness through his free will. That is, if he does not achieve this in his lifetime, there will be further opportunities for the soul to be perfected through free will.

### Rabbi Isaac Luria, Arizal, *Shaar Hagilgulim* 8 (Gates of Reincarnation)

דע, כי הנשמות יתגלגלו לכמה סבות, הראשונה הוא, לפי שעבר על איזו עבירה מעבירות שבתורה, ובא לתקן. הב' הוא, לתקן איזו מצוה שחסר ממנו. השלישית היא, שבא לצורך אחרים, להדריכם ולתקנם.

**Know that souls reincarnate for several reasons, the first being that a person transgressed one of the laws of the Torah and returns to rectify it. The second is to rectify a mitzvah that it is missing, and the third is that it comes for others, to guide and rectify them.**

### Arizal, *Shaar Hagilgulim* 11 (Gates of Reincarnation)

גם צריך שתדע, כי האדם צריך לקיים כל תרי"ג מצות, במעשה, וכן בדיבור...הנה הנפש לשתיה שלימה לעלות אל מקומה, הוא ע"י שני תנאים, האחד הוא הנקרא תקון שלמות הנפש, והוא קיום כל רמ"ח מצוות עשה. והשני הוא תקון פגם הנפש, אם עשתה שום עבירה משס"ה מצות לא תעשה.

**It is also necessary to know that a person must fulfill all 613 *mitzvot* in action and in speech...For the *nefesh* to become complete and ascend in its place, two conditions must be fulfilled. The first...the fulfillment of all 248 positive *mitzvot*. The second is...if he transgresses any of the 365 negative *mitzvot*.**

*Zohar*, Vol. I, p. 186b

כל זמנא דבר נש לא יצלח בהאי עלמא, קב"ה עקר ליה ונטע ליה בכמה זמנין כמלקדמי.

**As long as a person is unsuccessful in fulfilling his purpose in this world, the Holy One, Blessed He, uproots him and replants him over and over again.**

Overall questions about *Gilgul Nefashot*:

1. How might the concept of reincarnation influence Jewish ideas of justice and righteousness during one's lifetime?
2. What do these sources contribute to our understanding of the relationship between body and soul?
3. How does the idea of reincarnation contribute to the concept of human imperfection and the spiritual journey towards perfection?
4. In what way might these sources, or the topic of reincarnation in general, be used to provide comfort to mourners or individuals dealing with loss?
5. What are your thoughts about reincarnation?

### 3. *Olam Haba*

Learn through the following texts which deal with the nature of the afterlife and the journey of the soul after death.

#### *Mishna Avot 3:1*

עֲקִיבָא בֶן מַהֲלַל אֵל אֹמֵר, הַסְתַּמַּל בְּשִׁלְשָׁה דְבָרִים וְאִי אַתָּה בָּא לִיְדֵי עֲבָרָה. דַּע מֵאֵין בָּאתָ, וּלְאֵן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, וְלִפְנֵי מִי אַתָּה עֹתִיד לָתֵן דִּין וְחֶשְׁבוֹן. מֵאֵין בָּאתָ, מִטְּפָה סְרוּחָה, וּלְאֵן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, לְמָקוֹם עֶפֶר רְמָה וְתוֹלַעָה. וְלִפְנֵי מִי אַתָּה עֹתִיד לָתֵן דִּין וְחֶשְׁבוֹן, לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא:

**Akiva ben Mahalalel says: Pay careful attention to three things and you will not come to sin: know from where you came, to where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give a final account and a reckoning. From where do you come? From a putrid drop. Where are you going? To a place of dust, of worm and of maggot. Before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning?**



**Before the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.**

1) *This mishna emphasizes the difference between the fate of our bodies and of our souls. Why would a focus on these descriptions of what happens after death help one to avoid sinning in life?*

#### **Mishna Avot 4:16**

**רבי יעקב אומר, העולם הזה דומה לפרוזדור בפני העולם הבא. התקן עצמך בפרוזדור, כדי שתכנס לטרקלין:**

**Rabbi Yaakov says: this world is like a hallway before the world to come. Fix yourself in the hallway so that you may enter the main room.**

1) *What is the difference between a hallway and a “main room?”*

2) *What do you think is meant by “fix yourself?”*

3) *Does this idea resonate with you?*

#### **Mishna Avot 4:17**

**הוא היה אומר, יפה שעה אחת בתשובה ומעשים טובים בעולם הזה, מכל חיי העולם הבא. ויפה שעה אחת של קורת רוח בעולם הבא, מכל חיי העולם הזה**

**He [R' Yaakov] would say: One hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than all the time in the world to come. And one hour of pleasure in the world to come is better than all the time in this world.**

1) *If the world to come is the world of reward, why would repentance and good deeds in this world be better than eternity in the world to come?*

2) *What might make pleasure in the world to come better than eternity in this world?*

#### **Zohar 1:218**

**בשעתא דבר נש אסתלק מעלמא, אבוי וקריבוי משתכחין תמן עמיה, וחמא לון ואשתמודע לון, וכל אינון דהוה מדוריה גבייהו בהווא עלמא בדרגא חד, כלהו מתכנשי ומשתכחי עמיה, ואזלין עם**

## נִשְׁמָתִיהָ, עַד אֶתֶר דְּתִשְׁרִי בְּאֶתְרֶיהָ

At the hour of one's departure from the world, one's parents and relatives gather around him, and he sees them and recognizes them, and likewise all with whom he associated in this world, and they accompany his soul to the place where it is to abide.

1) *Have you heard this idea before?*

2) *Do you think this idea is comforting? Is it comforting for the relatives who are still alive? Is it comforting to the person who is dying?*

### 4. Bring it all together

While some students might desire teachers to share a black and white, detailed description of the next world, the objective of this section is to underscore the limits of human understanding.

#### *Sanhedrin 99a*

אמר רבי חייא בר אבא א"ר יוחנן כל הנביאים כולן לא נתנבאו אלא לימות המשיח אבל לעולם הבא (ישעיהו סד, ג) עין לא ראתה אלקים זולתך (אלקים) יעשה למחכה לו.

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba says that Rabbi Yoḥanan says: In their prophecies with regard to redemption and the end of days, all the prophets prophesied only about the messianic era, but with regard to the World-to-Come the reward is not quantifiable, as it states: "No eye has seen it, *Elokim*, aside from You, Who will do for those who await *Elokim*." (*Yeshayahu* 64:3).

#### *Berachot 17a*

מרגלא בפומיה דרב [לא כעולם הזה העולם הבא] העולם הבא אין בו לא אכילה ולא שתיה ולא פרי ורביה ולא משא ומתן ולא קנאה ולא שנאה ולא תחרות אלא צדיקים יושבין ועטרותיהם בראשיהם ונהנים מזיו השכינה שנאמר (שמות כד, יא) ויחזו את האלקים ויאכלו וישתו:

Rav was wont to say: The World-to-Come is not like this world. In the World-to-Come there is no eating, no drinking, no procreation, no business negotiations, no jealousy, no hatred, and no competition. Rather, the righteous sit with their crowns upon their heads, enjoying the splendor of the Divine Presence, as it is

stated: "And they beheld *Elokim*, and they ate and drank" (*Shemot* 24:11), meaning that beholding God's countenance is tantamount to eating and drinking.

1) What do you think is meant by "crowns upon their heads" if it is not a physical world?

**Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, *Nefesh HaChaim* 1:12**

The actions themselves of the person constitute the reward in *olam haba*. After the soul departs from the body it rises to take pleasure and satisfaction with the light, energy, and worlds of *Kedusha* (Holiness) that have been added and multiplied by his good actions. This is what the Sages meant when they said that "All of Israel have a portion TO the world to come and not IN the world to come. "IN" implies that *olam haba* is ready and waiting from the time of Creation, as if it were something with a separate existence, and if man warrants he will receive a portion of it for his reward. In truth, *olam haba* is [made up of] the actions of the person, which he expanded and added and perfected into a place for himself [to dwell]...

1) What does it mean that the actions of a person constitute the reward in *olam haba*?

2) How does this idea modify or change your conception of *olam haba*?

**Nachmanides, Ramban, *Torat HaAdam*, Shaar Gmul**

עכשיו ביארנו כונתנו בשכרי המצות וענשן ונחזור בקצרה כי שכר הנפשות וקיומם בעולם הנשמות נקרא לרבותינו זיכרוןם לברכה "גן עדן" ופעמים קורין אותו "עליה" ו"ישיבה שלמעלה" ואחרי כן יבא המשיח והוא מכלל חיי העולם הזה ובסופה יהיה יום הדין ותחיית המתים שהוא השכר הכולל הגוף והנפש והוא העיקר הגדול

And now we have explained the ideas of reward for *mitzvot* and punishments (for transgressions) and we will briefly explain now about the reward for the souls and their existence in the "world of souls" (which comes after death). This is what the Rabbis refer to as "*Gan Eden*" or "*yeshiva shel maala*" (the heavenly study hall). After *Gan Eden*, *Mashiach* will come and bring about the day of Divine Judgment (for the world) and there will be resurrection of the dead which is the final reward for both our souls and our bodies (and will be in this world).

The Ramban maintains that there are 2 stages after death. First, the soul goes to *Gan Eden* which is a fully spiritual existence. At a later stage, when THIS WORLD is ready, there will be the messianic age when the departed souls will be reunited with their bodies and return to this world for their final reward. Do you like the idea of a physical reward after death? Why or why not?

### Reflection/Concluding Activity

Many philosophical and cultural works refer to the idea that an awareness of mortality can heighten one's appreciation for life. Share one or more of these references with your students as a trigger for this activity. For example, listen to this song by Tim McGraw: [Tim McGraw – Live Like You Were Dying \(Official Music Video\)](#) and think about the words "I hope you get the chance to live like you were dying."

1. Compare/contrast this with some of the ideas you learned above about the Jewish concept of life after death. For example:
  - This world is a "hallway" to *olam haba*
  - An hour in *olam haba* is equivalent to eternity in this world
  - Belief in resurrection of the dead
2. How do the following ideas, "live like you were dying" on the one hand and "this world is a hallway to the world to come" on the other hand, influence or change your attitude towards living a meaningful life? Do you relate to one more than the other? Why?

## Spirituality Journal

*Ask students to write in their journals using one of the following prompts.*

- After having learned several different ideas regarding the afterlife in Jewish thought, go back to your original list of beliefs from the K-W-B activity and see if you would modify, subtract, or add anything to the list. Explain your reasons.
- Have any of your understandings of the Jewish laws and rituals around death and mourning changed as a result of the ideas you learned about in the unit?
- How can learning about what happens after death influence or inform the way we live our lives?
- What questions do you still have about this topic?