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THE NEW SHOFAR

Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord's Prayer is about…Athanasius of Alexandria

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Does Judaism Believe in an Afterlife?

Faith begins in mystery. Among the greatest mysteries we face is the afterlife. What happens when we die? Do we see our loved ones? Do we know them? Do they know us? The questions are endless. Jewish wisdom offers no definitive answer. We can identify, however, several core teachings.

There is an afterlife: Texts from every era in Jewish life identify a world where people go when they die. In the Bible it's an underworld called **Sheol.** In the rabbinic tradition it's known by a number of names, including the *yeshiva shel mallah*, the school on high.

Heaven has open door policy: Heaven is not a gated community. The righteous of any people and any faith have a place in it. Our actions, not our specific beliefs, determine our fate.

The afterlife can take many form Jewish beliefs in the afterlife are as diverse as Judaism itself, from the traditional view expecting the unity of flesh and spirit in a resurrected body, to the idea that we live on in our children and grandchildren, to a sense of heaven.

We live on through others: The Reform Jewish prayerbook expresses this idea through the metaphor of a leaf and a tree. A leaf drops to the ground, but it nourishes the soil so more plants and trees spring up. The same is true in our lives. We nourish the future through the influence we have on those who follow us. It can happen in unimaginable ways.

Life after death? - Dives and Lazarus

The story centres on the reversal of fortunes that takes place after Lazarus and the rich man die. It links agony or comfort after death with how we treat the less fortunate around us, much like Matthew links eternal life and punishment with how we treat the hungry and thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick, and those in prison (25:31-46). This ***reversal after death*** is ultimate. An unbridgeable chasm exists between Lazarus at Abraham's side and the rich man in Hades.

Luke stresses the way the status of the rich and the poor is reversed in the kingdom of God. When Jesus is conceived in Mary's womb, she exults that the hungry have been filled and the rich sent away empty (1:46-55; cf. 1 Samuel 2:1-10). Jesus tells the poor that God favours them and that the kingdom of God belongs to them, but he warns the rich of what is to come since they have already received their consolation in this life (6:20-25).

Luke makes clear that the poor are a focus of Jesus' ministry. He declares that he has been anointed by the Spirit of the Lord *to bring good news to the poor* Jesus admonishes his followers not just to invite to their parties the friends and neighbours who can repay them, but to extend their invitations to "*the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind*".

This is echoed when Jesus describes the kingdom of God as a wedding banquet where the invitation has been extended to *the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind*.

Yet if the poor have good news preached to them, then the rich receive a somewhat different message. The rich young ruler who asks Jesus how he can inherit eternal life is told that he is to sell all he has and distribute the money to the poor. When this makes him sad Jesus comments that the rich tend to have more difficulty entering the kingdom of God (18:18-30). Like the rich fool, the wealthy store their treasure in ever larger barns they cannot take with them after they die (12:8-21). They may store up “treasures for themselves,” but they are not “rich toward God” (12:21).

But be aware of the full meaning

Being “rich toward God” — and having “treasure in heaven”– is not just about piety. It is also about selling possessions and distributing wealth to the poor (12:33; 18:22). After he encounters Jesus, Zaccheus gives half of his possessions to the poor and repays anyone he has defrauded four times as much (19:1-10). As the church emerges in Acts, new converts would “sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (2:45; 4:32-34).

The story of the rich man and Lazarus might be difficult for many Australians, whose lifestyle stands in sharp contrast with a majority of people in the world who live on much less. Like so much else that Luke says about money and possessions, it stands as a stinging indictment not only of the great confidence we place in financial security, but also of the drastic inequities between rich and poor we allow to perpetuate.

In this story, God’s eternal judgment has everything to do with how we use wealth in this life and whether we attend to those less fortunate in our midst. Our temptation is to explain away a story like this and to remove its blatant depiction of how God will ultimately vindicate the cause of the poor. But the message has been clearly stated. Like the rich man’s five brothers, we have been given all the warning we need.

Conclusion

In Judaism the belief in afterlife is less a leap of faith than a logical consequence of other Jewish beliefs. If we believe in a God who is all-powerful and all-just, we cannot believe that this world, in which evil far too often triumphs, is the only arena in which human life exists. For if this existence **is** the final word, and God permits evil to win, then it cannot be that God is good. Thus, when someone says he or she believes in God but not in an afterlife, either they have not thought the issue through, or they do not believe in God, or the divine being in whom they believe is amoral or immoral…. Because Judaism believes that God is good, it believes that God rewards good people; it does not believe that Adolf Hitler, and those like him, and his victims share the same fate. Beyond that, it is hard to assume much more. We are asked to leave afterlife in God's hands.

Jesus reassures us of a key message regarding God’s Kingdom. How we live now in this life, does have a bearing on how we will live eternally in the next.