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What does Judaism have to say about life after death?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

When our son was born a little over four years ago, I wanted to honor the memory of my mother, Florence, who, by dying before he was born, could at least bequeath to her grandson her name, if not the embodiment of her spirit that her name captured. My mother, in turn, preserved the connection to her own grandmother, whose name had also been Florence.

However, we were not taken by any boy's names starting with the letter "F" and were uncertain how to perpetuate this special link between the generations. We were prepared to think farther afield when a friend suggested that we might think of a way to use my mother's name and build a new name from it, like taking Nathan and turning it into Jonathan. We went the opposite direction and found a name already embedded in my mother's that appealed to us, and that is how Oren became Oren. He already understands this connection. As her personality helped to shape who I am and continues to live through me, I believe Oren is already being formed in her image, and will keep alive parts of her for yet another generation.

We live on after our death in the good works that we have done and in the good name we have made for ourselves. The poet Zelda said, "Each of us has a name given by our words and given by our deeds." Long before her we are instructed by Ecclesiastes (7:1) that "a good name is better than precious oil," and it says in Proverbs (22:1), "a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches."

Judaism, in its origins, makes clear reference to burial customs and mourning practices, including the purchase of graves and the tearing of one's garment, but the Biblical text is conspicuously reticent about discussing what happens next. There are references to *sheol* – a kind of underworld destination for all the dead, a kind of oblivion in the dust for both the righteous and the sinner – but the Bible's virtual silence on the matter suggests a finality to life.

Apparently this message was too harsh for most people, and the cruelty of injustice whereby good people suffered and the wicked prospered was too disheartening. And so evolved, full-blown in the rabbinic period, the notion of a world-to-come, an Olam Haba, particularly designed for the righteous who suffered on earth and who would get their just compensation in a well-deserved afterlife, including an ultimate resurrection. The wicked, of course, would be relegated to a place of punishment, a hell or gehenna, where, in some severe cases, their souls would be punished for eternity and, for others, purged over the course of a year before being finally reprieved.

But it is questionable how many modern Jews – of all our denominations – really give much thought to this elaborate construction not to mention derive comfort from it. For Humanistic Jews, who are, by disposition, dependent on empirical reality for truth, all we know is this world and this life. We live our lives here and now. We make no bets on an unknown future. Not only is the jury still out. We are not waiting for it to come back. Were we even to believe in a heaven, albeit a metaphorical one, our mission would be to bring it about on earth, not to wait for it in a life-postponed.

We may not believe in an afterlife, but we can gain a kind of immortality through our deeds and our accomplishments, the institutions that we build, the charities that we endow, the families we nurture, and the lasting memories that endure in the minds of those who will survive us. Even more important, we live on through those who have internalized our teachings and values and who carry on our work even if the memory of the source of those teachings is forgotten.

Finally, whether or not there is life after death does not just apply to the question of the deceased. It also has to do, more relevantly, with how one returns to life after suffering the death of a loved one, how one especially finds the courage to go on with life in face of insufferable tragedy. This, perhaps, is the noblest teaching that Judaism has to offer. It teaches us that there is a time to mourn and a time to renew one's commitment to living. It teaches us not to don the sackcloth of grief as a permanent garment but, over time, to cast it off.

When Oren was about two-and-a-half, and his half-sister Blair was 14, my wife's father, their Grandpa Lou, died. Lou was a baker. Whenever we sing "Patty Cake" in our family, the line is changed to be, "Patty cake, patty cake baker's man, bake me a cake like Grandpa Lou can." Oren may forget the cruise that Grandpa Lou took us on shortly before he died, but I hope he and Blair will preserve these changed lyrics and, some day, pass them down, to the generation that comes after them.

Zekher tzaddikim livracha. May the memory of the righteous be for a blessing.

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY
OF FLORENCE SCHWEITZER AND LOUIS GOODMAN

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer presents a view of Humanistic Judaism as a regular contributor to Moment Magazine's "Ask the Rabbis" column. The response printed here may be slightly altered from the version that first appeared in the magazine. You can find Moment Magazine on-line at www.momentmag.com.