

Dear Rabbi,

We always were told that Jews don't believe in an afterlife, but were recently taught that we believe there's a place called the "world to come". Does that mean there is an afterlife? Where is the world to come?

Taryn & Jamie

Dear Taryn and Jamie,

The belief in an afterlife is one of the core "13 principles of faith", the 13 most basic Jewish beliefs. This is the foundation for the Jewish belief in eternal reward and retribution. It is predicated upon the eternity of the soul, which is a spark of G-dliness. The soul is matched up with a physical body with a particular mission to accomplish in this world, as part of Jewish and world history. By fulfilling that mission the soul reaches its own private Tikkun.

The first place the soul enters after leaving this world is called "Gan Eden" or the Garden of Eden. This place, which is the "world of souls", is also temporary, and is mainly a holding place of bliss and happiness until the final "olam haba", or "next world".

The next stage is called the "next world" or "world to come" refers to that period of time, subsequent to the Messianic period, when the souls of those who were righteous in this world will be reunited with their bodies, which will come back to life in a greatly elevated spiritual state. Unlike this world, where our souls are mostly covered up by our physical bodies, in the world to come the bodies will be almost transparent, with the intense illumination of our souls shining out. These new, spiritual bodies, which grow out of our decayed physical bodies, remain eternally connected to our souls, and share in the soul's reward. The reason for this is as follows:

Our souls cannot fulfill their purposes and their Tikkun without the partnership of our bodies. A soul cannot light Shabbos candles, give Tzedaka or blow a Shofar. A soul in a body can. Consequently, the ultimate reward can only be to the partnership of the body and soul, which would be in this world, albeit in a greatly heightened spiritual state. A comparison to this would be a plain gray caterpillar which spins a cocoon, its "grave", and "dies" there, only to emerge from its "death" as a beautiful multi-colored butterfly which can soar into the sky. Our dense, physical bodies will come out of their state of decay into immense, spiritual bodies that will soar above anything we can now imagine.

The bliss and ecstasy the body/soul will enjoy in the world to come is a direct outgrowth of the actions the person performed in this physical world. More deeply, the reward is actually the *mitzvos themselves* that the person fulfilled. Every mitzvah is filled with spiritual light, (we just don't have the spiritual eyes to see that light in our present state). The Kabbalists teach that when one performs the mitzvah he is enveloped by that spiritual light, it becoming deeply connected to the performer. When finished, that light brought out by the mitzvah is transferred to that person's "bank account" in the spiritual world, and becomes another spiritual brick in that person's own personal world to come. This is a world which that person is building himself through his own actions. Olam Haba is not one generic place one either gets a ticket to get in or not, rather it's everyone's own individual connection to G-d. That connection to G-d, that illumination; which is the greatest possible enjoyment, is that person's Olam Haba. It is there that one experiences the overwhelming joy of fulfillment in the realization of his potential, the deepest pleasure of closeness to G-d, the source of all that is good.