

Dear Rabbi Fried,

I grew up with the understanding that heaven and hell are Christian concepts. Recently I was surprised to hear that Orthodox Jews believe in these concepts. Is this true?
Steven R.

Dear Steven,

The Rabbinical writings often mention heaven and hell, and they are, in fact, very Jewish concepts. The Mishna says in Pirkei Avos "This world is comparable to the entry hall of a king's palace before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the entry hall in order that you will be granted entry to the palace". The "world to come" is referring to heaven, as it is referred to throughout rabbinic literature. Hell is called "Gehinom", and is a very real concept. The only thing similar, however, between the Jewish and Christian concepts of heaven and hell are their English terms. Otherwise, they are worlds apart.

When we talk about "heaven" with reference to an afterlife, this Jewishly refers to two separate stages in the eternity of the soul. The first stage is where the souls go immediately after death. At that time there is heaven, more precisely "olam haneshamos" or the "world of the souls". This is a spiritual "place", or world, where the souls derive joyous bliss from basking in the light of G-d. Nearly all need to spend some time in Gehinom, or hell. The concept of hell is not a punishment, but a purgatory. It is compared to the smelting of gold, which in order to obtain high-grade, pure gold, it must be smelted to burn off and separate any impurities. Similarly, every wrong-doing performed in one's life places a blemish on one's soul, like an impurity in the gold. For a maximum of 12 months, to the extent necessary, the soul goes through this purification process to burn off the blemishes, in order that the soul's eternity will be unblemished and pure. That is the purpose of "hell's fires".

The Kabbalists explain that even Jews who believe in heaven often have a misconception. Heaven is not one large generic "place" that one either gets in if they have enough "tickets:", or doesn't. Heaven is very private, very personal and unique for each soul. Each person builds his or her own heaven while in this world. With every mitzvah one performs, they are surrounded by a spiritual light from G-d, and with the completion of the mitzvah, that light goes up and becomes one more "brick" in the building of that person's Olam Haba, next world. Heaven, the "next world", is the sum total of all the light that individual illuminated through the fulfillment of mitzvos. That spiritual light is the extent of the person's connection to G-d, and that connection is the reward itself. Every misdeed, or lack of fulfillment of a mitzvah, minimizes the light of that person's portion in the World to Come, for eternity. Every mitzvah, conversely, adds eternal bliss and illumination to that person's forever.

The final stage of Olam Habah in Judaism is the reconnection of the soul to the body, albeit in a greatly heightened state of body, in the period call the Resurrection of the Dead. This a very basic, core Jewish belief. It is predicated upon the great importance placed upon *action* by Judaism. It's not enough that we *think* as Jews, but we must *do*. The soul is incapable of action without the partnership of the body. Therefore it is only right that the body should share in the eternal reward of its partner, the soul. No soul could don tefillin or light Shabbos candles without the body participating. The eternal body will be a spiritual representation of the physical body in the next world, which will actually grow out of the physical body, much like the butterfly grows out of the caterpillar after its "burial" in the cocoon.

I am not doing service to these core concepts by writing about them so briefly, but we can at least know clearly that these are very Jewish concepts when understood from a Jewish vantage. (There's no satan there with a pitchfork).