

Rosh Hashanah Drash 5768, September 13, 2007
Sue Morningstar

Happy new year!! שנה טובה!!

At this time of the year, we hear much talk about life, and death,

גמר חטימה טובה May you be inscribed in the book of life,
"who will live and who will die," on Rosh Hashana it is decided who will live through
the next year and who will not...

What does that mean?? and what does our Hebrew wisdom tradition have to say about
death, the soul, and the afterlife?

In our mystical tradition, the **נשמה**, the soul enters the body with the first breath,
in Hebrew to breath **לנשום** comes from **נשמה**
And it really means, to be souled, (s-o-u-l-e-d).

The kabbalah says, **אתרוגא דלטה אתרוגא דלאלה**
As above, so below. Everything that is occurring here on the physical plane, is also
happening simultaneously in a parallel spiritual universe. (This is symbolized in the
2 triangles of the magen david, one pointing downward to earth, one pointing upward to
heaven.)

We see this illustrated right from the moment of birth. As we take a breath, and the
umbilical cord is cut, we are cut off from our source, the comforting, safe womb of
our mother, and thrust into the material world. so too the soul, which is cut off from
the comforting safe spiritual realm and thrust into a physical container. We spend
much of our lives yearning to return to the comfort of the womb, as our souls yearn to
return to that comforting Godspace of the spirit world.

And, the kabbalah teaches, when we take our last breath, the silver cord that attaches
the soul to the body is severed, and the soul is finally returned to its origin, its
original state of connectedness. This is hinted at in the phrase: **חדש ימיו כקדם**

King Solomon in Ecclesiastes kohelet 12:7 says:

וישב העפר על הארץ כשהיה, והרוח תשוב אל האלהים אשר נתנה.

The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

The Rambam, maimonides, the rabbi philosopher and physician of the middle ages
explains that this implies that the soul, the ruach, the spirit, is that which remains
after death, and is not subject to destruction.

Many of us have had the experience of connecting with the soul of a loved one who has
passed to the other world, either in a dream or waking state, as a vision, a message,
or a strong palpable presence.

The rabbis say: The souls are with us, and they are **eager to help us**. They are just waiting for us to ask for their assistance.

Here is a true and amazing story:

A young woman, came into my office, she believed she had had a miscarriage. She brought a Ziploc bag with a large blood clot in it, and asked me if I could tell if she had miscarried or not. I told her that I couldn't tell by looking at it, that I had to send it to pathology, and they would let us know. She was reluctant to do this, because she and her partner wanted to do a ritual with it, at the river. But I assured them it would come back, and called the lab, spoke with the supervisor and was promised that they would send it back in a couple of weeks or so. The parents were fine with that.

I was sure to label the specimen very carefully, with many remarks on it to send it back to me. VERY IMPORTANT! RETURN TO SUE MORNINGSTAR!! DO NOT DISCARD!!!.

Sure enough, the bag did return to me a few weeks later, , labeled "products of conception". I called the young parents who came and picked it up.

She came back a few months later, very happy to report she was pregnant again. About 6 months later, just as she was going into labor, a woman walked along the coast in Gold Beach, where the Rogue River empties into the ocean. As the young woman's waters broke, the woman on the beach looked down and found a beautiful Indian pouch with a plastic bag inside, labeled VERY IMPORTANT! RETURN TO SUE MORNINGSTAR. . . she looked me up on the internet, mailed me the pouch in a package which landed on my desk alongside the message that the young woman had delivered a healthy baby boy.

I prayed over it and tried to discern why this "product of conception" had come full circle back to my office from the ocean?? Why did God send me this holy task?

Different traditions have different burial rites. Some by water, putting their bodies out to the sea, some by the fire of a funeral pyre, and some leave the body on a mountain top exposed to the air. Our Hebrew tribe is earth based, traditionally we bury our dead in the earth. I felt that this being made a full circle, and returned to me, because it wanted a burial in the earth. I buried it in the herb garden in front of my office and said Kaddish over it.

Our tradition teaches that the gravesite is a portal to the other world. We can go to the grave of a loved one, traditionally on their yahrzeit, but really at anytime, and ask their soul to intercede for us. In fact, if you are not near the grave of a loved one, there is a tradition of going to any grave, waving a ruble or a dollar and vowing to give it to tzedekah, if someone would contact your loved one on the other side.... We traditionally visit the gravesites of the great rebbes. Last year Reb Zalman made a pilgrimage to eastern Europe to visit the graves of the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid of Mezrich, Reb Zusha, and other prominent rebbes and communed with their souls about the future of Judaism. And just last week Reb Avi visited the gravesite of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's, where he prayed for the Rebbe's soul to intercede for many of us in our community.

A few years ago, the Jews of Ashland was blessed with a wonderful gift. Hank Kranzler, the photographer of the Shakespeare Festival, whom many of you knew, left us the land that is now the Tel Aviv Cemetery, part of Scenic Hills Memorial Park. A high point of my journey as a rabbinic student was participating in the consecration of the ground on a cold blustery winter day. Along with several rabbis (including Hank's orthodox brother from NY), we engaged in an ancient ceremony. We circled the area 7 times while reciting prayers and sprinkling holy earth from Israel along the perimeter. Hank was buried there a few days later.

I encourage you to take a ride out there. Is in a lovely peaceful spot with an expansive beautiful view overlooking the Siskiyou mountains and the town of Ashland from the south. After turning off the road, you follow a country lane, cross over Bear Creek on a wooden bridge as if crossing into another world. Cows graze on the hills, the air is full of birds singing with joy, the souls are everywhere. At the entrance to Tel Aviv is a young weeping willow, her head swaying in the wind.

The beauty and quiet of the surroundings make it a place that is nourishing to us while still on the physical plane, and we can imagine it must also be comforting to the souls buried there as well.

Say hello to Hank, Mathew, Vic, Al, Betty. See if there is a spot that calls to you, that looks like it might be a good portal for you in the next life.

Reb Zalman calls the body,
"that marvelous instrument on which the soul plays life for God."

And when the opus of our lives comes to its final rest, how blessed we are to have a place right here in our neighborhood where we can leave our bodies among friends.

Hopefully a long long time from now.

משברך אבותינו ואמותינו May the one who blessed our forefathers and foremothers. . . and in the merit of all of our ancestors and loved ones in gan eden

bless us that we have a sweet, healthy, joyous, abundant, passionate, full year and may we all be written and sealed in the book of Life.

Good yuntif!