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**Rabbi Berel Wein:**

**Influences & Reflections**



*Rabbi Berel Wein, the popular spiritual leader, scholar, and historian, died in Jerusalem this past Shabbat, August 16, 2025, at the age of 91. May his memory be a blessing.*

One of my most vivid childhood memories is of my father taking me with him to Chicago’s Midway Airport to greet Rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog, the chief rabbi of Palestine after the Second World War. Almost all the distinguished Orthodox rabbis in Chicago came to the airport that day to welcome him. I remember him alighting from the plane and walking down the stairs in his shiny top hat, holding his cane in one hand and a *Tanach* (Bible) in the other. With his silver beard and aristocratic demeanor, he was a majestic presence.

We all accompanied Rabbi Herzog to the yeshiva, where he delivered a 45-minute Talmudic lecture in Yiddish. I still remember his topic, and though I was not yet bar mitzvah, I pretty much followed his discourse. After that, he addressed us in English. Having been a rabbi in Dublin, he spoke with a slight Irish brogue, which I found somewhat incongruous with his Eastern European rabbinical appearance.

“How are you going to help rebuild the Jewish People?”

Rabbi Herzog told us he had been to the Vatican and had asked Pope Pius XII to return the thousands of Jewish children entrusted to Catholic institutions in Europe by parents hoping to save them from annihilation at the hands of the Germans. The pope had flatly refused, claiming that since all the children had been baptized upon entering those institutions, they could not now be given over to those who would raise them in a different faith. Overcome with emotion, the rabbi put his head down on the lectern and wept bitterly. We were all in shock, as the enormity of the Jewish tragedy of World War II began sinking in.

Then Rabbi Herzog defiantly raised his head and looked at the young men gathered before him. “I cannot save those thousands of Jewish children,” he declared, “but I ask of you – how are you going to help [rebuild the Jewish People](http://www.aish.com/jl/h/dv/Rebuilding-the-Community-Miracle-of-Israel-4.html)?” Afterward, when we filed by him to shake his hand and receive his blessing, he repeated to each and every one of us: “Did you understand what I said to you? Don’t forget it.”

All my life, Rabbi Herzog’s words have echoed in my ears and soul. Numerous times in my rabbinic career, I’ve been discouraged and downhearted. But then I remembered his words. They have continually inspired and challenged me, shaping many of my decisions and actions.

**Herman Wouk**

Aside from the two very influential speeches I heard from Rabbi Herzog and Rabbi Kahaneman (the Ponivezher Rav), two addresses delivered at banquets in the 1950s impacted my life’s ambitions and thoughts.

The first was by Herman Wouk, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author, playwright, and screenwriter. He was an observant Jew who had made good in the outside world – a rarity in his time. Back then, the Jewish world believed that no Orthodox Jew could succeed in American life without sacrificing Torah observance and beliefs. The prevalent assumption was that one had to blend in to the general American lifestyle and mores in order to achieve fame and fortune. Considered an anachronism, Orthodox Jews were encouraged to maintain a low profile and never rock the boat.

In such an anti-Orthodox climate, Herman Wouk delivered a 45-minute oratorical gem in defense of Torah study and observance to a mainly non-observant audience. He warned that his listeners would have no Jewish descendants if they themselves did not adopt a more Jewish lifestyle. The audience was stunned, for the Orthodox rabbis of the day dared not be so blunt. For the first time in a long time, I felt that Orthodoxy had a chance to succeed in a big way in America.

I always have been grateful to Wouk for that speech and for his great book *This Is My G-d*. I found this work very useful in my rabbinic career; I must have given away dozens of copies to Jews who knew nothing of their faith but felt some inner pull to at least find out what they were abandoning.

The second speech, delivered at a banquet for Beis Medrash L’Torah in the early 1950s, was by Rabbi Pinchas M. Teitz of Elizabeth, New Jersey. Most European rabbis used speaking engagements to bemoan the state of American Jewry, especially in comparison to the glory days of Eastern European Jewish life. Not Rabbi Teitz. He spoke of a coming revolution in American Jewish life; of a growing and vital Orthodoxy; of the triumph of the day school and yeshiva movements. His optimism made him a heroic figure in my eyes, and he remained such over many decades. I had much to do with him later in life, and he was of great help to me in numerous rabbinic matters. [Every rabbi needs a hero](http://www.aish.com/jw/s/The-Voice-of-History.html) to help guide him, and Rabbi Teitz played that role for me in many areas of Jewish public life.

**Supporting the Donor**

Rabbi Kahaneman, the Ponivezher Rav, enlisted me to be his driver a few mornings a week as he raised funds for his yeshiva [in Miami Beach]. Just being in his company was an honor and a joy. I learned a great deal from him about people, life, fundraising, and – above all – Torah knowledge and values. He loved all Jews (no easy task), and they loved him back. He taught me that one must accept personal insults and slights for the sake of Torah. I witnessed many “miraculous” feats of fundraising. He could get money from a stone.

During those years, I knew a wonderful man in my congregation. He was a widower without children, though he had nephews and nieces. He was quite wealthy, but at only 55 had suffered two heart attacks and survived cancer. His doctors advised him to live out his few remaining years in the Florida sunshine rather than the frost and snow of northern New Jersey. So, he retired to Miami Beach, where he became a leader in our community. Mindful of his physicians’ predictions, he dutifully purchased an annuity plan that would provide him with a generous income until age ninety. He fully expected to die before then.

But the L-rd thought otherwise, and this fellow reached his 90th birthday fully well, still productive, and active. But now he had no income, and he rapidly used up his savings. No bank would advance him a mortgage due to his age. So, I organized deliveries of food and other necessities to him.

The man had been a staunch supporter of the Ponivezh Yeshiva, giving Rav Kahaneman a sizable donation every year. One day, the Rav instructed me to take him to this man’s house. I told him that his former supporter had no money now and that our visit under these circumstances would embarrass him. Nevertheless, the Rav insisted.

We arrived and sat down in the man’s living room. The Rav announced in his mellifluous voice, and with that wonderful smile on his face, “Until now, you have generously helped the yeshiva in its times of need. Now the yeshiva is going to repay you in kind. Every month the yeshiva will send you the amount of your monthly annuity check, and I want you to continue living as you always have.” Offsetting the man’s protests, he added, “After 120 years, you and I will straighten out this matter between us.”

As we left the bewildered old gentleman, the Rav told me, “A yeshiva is also obligated to perform acts of kindness and mercy to others.” And that is exactly what he did. For the next four years, until the man passed away, the yeshiva sent him a monthly check.

Upon his death, he left his house in Miami Beach to the yeshiva.

**It’s All Your Fault**

During my years as rabbinic administrator, I flew a lot. Interesting things always seem to occur on my travels, providing me with lots of airplane stories. In early 1974, when the Arab oil embargo of America was in full force, I was seated on a plane next to a very well-dressed businesswoman. In mid-flight, without warning, she turned to me and said, “You know, all this trouble we’re in is your fault.” America was suffering from a major gasoline shortage, with long lines at every gas station, bringing much latent anti-Semitism to the fore. Yet I was taken aback by the nature and tone of her words.

Somehow, I very calmly answered her, “No, madam. It may be because of me, but it is definitely not my fault.” We said nothing more for the rest of the flight.

Remember: Much may happen in human society and history for which the Jewish People may be the catalyst, but in no way does that make us at fault for what occurs. This crucial subtlety underpins all intelligent appraisals of [Jewish history.](http://www.aish.com/jl/h/dv/)

Reprinted from the current website of aish.com Excerpted from “Teach Them Diligently: The Personal Story of a Community Rabbi” by Rabbi Berel Wein*is published by Maggid Books, a division of Koren Publishers Jerusalem. It is*[*available online*](http://www.korenpub.com/EN/products/holiday/holiday/9781592643486)*and at local Jewish bookstores.*

**Rav Avigdor Miller on**

**Repeating the Great Truths**



**QUESTION**: What is the benefit of saying the Ani Ma’amins every day? I believe it. Why do I have to keep repeating it?

**ANSWER:** The answer is that it makes a tremendous difference in a person’s *emunah*. Some people’s *emunah* is like a very thin layer of paint – you give a little scrape and the paint comes off. Some people’s *emunah* is thicker than that. And you have to work all your life to grow in *emunah*.

It’s not a matter of repeating the foundations of truth because of a *chisaron*, a lack, of *emunah*. It’s not just “belief” that you are trying to work on. It’s not called *emunah* – it’s called *Da’as Hashem*. All your life you have to become more and more aware of Hakodosh Boruch Hu. When Moshe Rabeinu asked Hashem, “*Harei’nee nah es kivodecha*” – Please show me Your glory – was it because he lacked *emunah*, *chas veshalom*?! He wanted to get closer and closer to Hashem.

And therefore - we say *Ani Ma’amin* – in order that each time we say it – if we say it properly – we’re making it more and more clear to ourselves. If you say it a thousand times you’re making a much deeper impression than saying it just once – even if you believed it the first time.

That’s why it is so important to repeat the same *Kriyas Shema* every day. And the same *tefillos*. Every time you say it you are making it more and more deeply engrained into your mind. That’s why it is so important to repeat the great truths over and over again. Instead of every day saying something new – No! – repeat it again and again, and spend your time impressing upon your *neshama* the great truths of the Torah.

When you repeat an idea over and over again it becomes part of your personality.

The Chovos Halevavos says: “*Ha’machshava nimsheches achar ha’dibur*” – Your mind follows your words. Do you hear that important *yesod*? Your mind follows your words! Say the right words and your mind changes. The more you say the same words the more your mind becomes influenced by these words.



And therefore, we say again and again “*Shema Yisroel Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad*.” Of course, you have to know what you are saying.  Hashem means that He is the one who is “*havaya*”. He is the one who exists. He is the only one who exists. And He is the one who causes the world to exist. He is “*mihaveh es ha’briyah*”. And He is *Elokei****nu***. He is ours. That means that He has chosen us to be His *avodim*. And we must devote our lives to Him. And “*Vi’ahavta es Hashem Elokecha*” – you have to love Hashem.

Now, each time you say that, you are making it more and more real to yourself. You become more and more convinced of the truth. It’s precious. It’s valuable. Don’t think it’s just a small thing – a small amount of *to’eles*. No, it’s a tremendous *to’eles* each time. And therefore, each time you repeat the great truths, you are making yourself more and more of an *ish shalem* – a perfect person.

*Reprinted from the current Eikev 5785 email of Torah Avigdor. (Tape #E-252 – November 2, 2000)*

**The Eternal Concept of the Jewish “Cities of Refuge”**

**From the Teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe**

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Zt”l**



This week's Torah portion, Shoftim, speaks about the cities of refuge a person would flee to if he accidentally killed someone. There, the unintentional killer would dwell, protected from the wrath of the victim's relatives, until the High Priest who served in the Holy Temple passed away.

But not only unintentional killers sought refuge in these cities; even someone who committed murder intentionally was expected to flee there as well. The court would then convene and issue its ruling on the death. The cities of refuge offered protection, if only temporarily in some cases, to anyone who had caused a loss of life.

After the destruction of the Holy Temple and the dispersion of the Jewish people, the cities of refuge ceased to exist in the physical sense. Yet the Torah is eternal, and its lessons apply in every generation. In our times, therefore, the concept of "cities of refuge" finds expression in the spiritual dimension.

Our Sages taught that "the words of Torah absorb." In other words, the Torah itself is the refuge in which all may seek asylum. In the spiritual sense, "killing" symbolizes the act of committing a sin, causing a spiritual death to the G-dly soul, for the Torah's 613 mitzvot are the "ropes" that bind the soul to G-d. Transgressing the Torah's commandments damages those ties and threatens to cut the soul off from its G-dly source.

We learn from this week's Torah portion that it is never too late to repent, no matter how grave a transgression has been committed. Even the person who deliberately sinned can do teshuva (repentance) and seek protection in the refuge of Torah.

In one sense, nowadays we have a distinct advantage over our ancestors who lived during the times of the Holy Temple. In those days, repentance alone was not enough to atone for a sin. The unintentional killer had to remain exiled in the city of refuge until the death of the High Priest, and the intentional murderer (as defined by the Torah) received capital punishment. Yet after the destruction of the Temple, teshuva alone can atone for even the gravest sin.

Years ago, when Jewish courts had ultimate authority, a judge could only rule on what he himself had seen. G-d, however, can look into the heart of man and judge whether or not his repentance is sincere.

In the same way, the month of Elul, during which we take account of our actions of the previous year, is a "city of refuge" in time, offering us the same opportunity to clear the slate and merit a good and sweet year to come.

*Reprinted from the Parshat Shoftim 5762/2002 edition of L’Chaim, a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn, NY. Adapted from the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.*

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By the testimony of two (shenayim) witnesses, or three witnesses (17:6) Here the word shenayim is used, whereas further on it is written shenei (19:15): "By the testimony of two (shenei) witnesses, or by the testimony of three witnesses."

The Maharil Diskin explains that the first verse is discussing capital punishment, and in such a case, if one witness viewed the scene from one window and the second witness saw it from a different window, their testimonies cannot be joined into one testimony (Makkos 6b).

However, the second verse is talking about monetary law, in which case, even if each witness viewed the matter from a separate window, their testimonies can indeed be joined into one testimony. As a result, in the instance of the murderer, it is written shenayim, because both of them together are obligated to view the murder from the same place.

Whereas, later on it is written shenei, for in monetary cases, it is in fact permissible for the witnesses to see the incident from two separate places. (Kaftor Voferach- Rabbi Yisroel Avrohom Stein)

*Reprinted from the Parshat Shoftim 4785 email of R’ Yedidye Hirtenfeld’s whY I Matter parsha sheet for the Young Israel of Midwood in Brooklyn.*

**Thoughts that Count**

**for Our Parsha**

*You shall be perfect with the L-rd your G-d* (Deut. 18:13)

Just as it is important to safeguard one's physical health, a Jew must take steps to ensure that his soul is whole and that all his spiritual "limbs" are healthy. For just as there are 613 components in the human body - 248 limbs and 365 sinews - so too are there 613 parts of the Jewish soul whose state of perfection is dependent on observing the 613 commandments of the Torah.(Likrat Shabbat)

*You shall appoint a king over yourself* (Deut. 17:15)

The inner intent of this commandment is to instill in the Jewish people a sense of nullification before G-d and acceptance of the yoke of heaven. For a Jewish king is completely nullified before G-d; submitting to his sovereignty contains an element of nullification before G-d as well. (Derech Mitzvotecha)

*And this is the case of the slayer...whoever unwittingly kills his neighbor...he shall flee to one of those cities, and live* (Deut. 19:4,5)

The Torah designates six cities of refuge to which a person who has inadvertently killed someone can flee and atone for his deed. When Moshiach comes and the borders of Israel are expanded to include the territory of the Kini, Kenizi and Kadmoni, three more cities of refuge will be established. But why will additional cities be necessary in the Messianic Era? If peace will reign supreme, and violence between men will disappear from the face of the earth, what purpose will these cities of refuge serve? Although no new acts of violence will occur, the cities of refuge will allow those Jews who accidentally killed someone throughout the centuries of exile to seek atonement and be worthy of the Messianic Era. (The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rosh Chodesh Elul 5746)

*For these nations...hearken to soothsayers and to diviners. But as for you, the L-rd your G-d has not permitted you to do so* (Deut. 18: 14)

Heavenly bodies have no power over the Jew; whatever is foretold by stargazers will be nullified, for "Israel is not under the influence of the stars." (Sforno)

*Reprinted from the Parshat Shoftim 5762/2002 edition of L’Chaim.*

**How Does Hell Work?**

**Heaven's laundromat for the soul**

**By**[**Tzvi Freeman**](https://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/193/jewish/Freeman-Tzvi.htm)

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**Why Does Torah Talk About Punishment?**

A Jew, the [Torah](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1426382/jewish/Torah.htm) says again and again, must connect to G‑d from the heart. When you serve [G‑d](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/433240/jewish/God.htm) out of fear of retribution, you may be better off than someone who does not serve G‑d at all, but you’re not serving Him from your heart. You are serving Him only to avoid pain.

If so, why do you need to know about punishment—whether in this world or in the afterlife and Gehinnom? Why do the classic works on Jewish ethics find it necessary to discuss these things?

Simply because you need to know who you are, where you are, how life works, and the power of your actions.

Who are you? A divine soul.

Where are you? In a very challenging world.

 does it work? It provides options at every turn, to go down or to rise up.

What are the consequences? One moment of sincere, good deeds, our sages say, is worth more than the highest heaven could provide.1 That alone makes a lifetime worthwhile. But, inevitably, you will also come in contact every day with all sorts of substances and situations very foreign to your soul. As they say, it comes with the territory.

You want to keep that to a minimum by always keeping in mind why you are here: To make whatever you can into a holy experience, and by avoiding those things that can’t be budged.2

When your soul leaves, she will rise upward to the blissful experience she has prepared for herself. But she will need to release all the baggage holding her down. That’s really all that the punishments of Torah are about: helping you drop the bad baggage.

Because G‑d does not punish for the sake of punishment. He’s not out to get back at you. That’s absurd. You can’t cause Him any harm, so why would He take vengeance? Rather, out of His great love and kindness, He provides the means to rid yourself of whatever prevents you from rising to the place where you truly belong.3

**Why Must It Be Painful?**

Pain has a purpose: to protect you from getting hurt. There are people who don’t feel pain, and they are perpetually suffering severe burns, cuts, and other serious injuries.

Pain also has a vital role in the healing process. We know, for example, that chemically blocking the pain receptors in an animal’s nerves slows skin and bone healing. That’s because the same nerves that send pain signals to the brain are also busy dilating blood vessels, attracting immune cells, and stimulating tissue repair.4

The same with the soul. To the soul, any interruption of divine energy is like a stoppage of oxygen or blood to the body. So those unholy activities or words naturally cause her a lot of pain. If your soul is sensitive and feels the pain, she doesn’t allow such a thing to happen. If it slips by, the pain triggers an immediate response of remorse and the internal healing we call *teshuvah*.

But too often, the physical body desensitizes the soul and anesthetizes her pain. That’s how transgressions happen. You slip up and you can’t feel the consequences. Your soul’s lifeline is blocked, the current of life is set in disarray, and things cease to go the way they should. Hopefully, that’s a wake-up call and you get things in order. Then the final steps of recuperative healing can begin.

Is that healing a punishment? Certainly not in the common sense of the word. When your parents changed your diapers or bathed you and washed the sand and mud out of your hair, were they punishing you? They loved you and they wanted you to be clean and healthy. And, the truth is, had you not kicked and whined so much, it would have gone a lot easier.

So, too, in adulthood, if you can muster the strength to embrace whatever pain comes upon you, recognizing it as divine love and healing, you will lead a much happier life.

But what if you never pick up the call? That’s the real problem—when you don’t feel the pain. Or if you imagine that the pain is not telling you anything. Much illness, researchers are beginning to realize, comes from people lacking what’s come to be known as *interoception*,5 a perception of what is going on inside their bodies and what the pain they feel is trying to tell them. The roughness and toughness of life, it seems, can become its own anesthetic.

Upon leaving the body, however, the anesthesia wears off and your soul begins to ache from her wounds. No longer a denizen of this world, [*teshuvah*](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/567537/jewish/Teshuvah-The-Art-of-Return.htm)is no longer on the menu. Now, the pain alone must do its healing.6

Before we describe that process, here’s a story to illustrate the problem:

**It’s Just Dirt**

David Goldberg lived on an upscale street in a Michigan suburb. So upscale, they never paved the street, leaving it a bumpy dirt road. That way, nobody came by who didn’t belong there.

David told us about the luxury car he bought to commute to work every day. He thought it was a great deal, but after only two years or so, it was forever giving him trouble. The brakes, the transmission, the mileage—everything was substandard. David figured he’s been sold a lemon.

Before returning to the dealer, David went to see his mechanic. “Let me hoist it up,” the mechanic said, “and take a better look.”

As you may have guessed, the entire underside of the car chassis, inside and out, was caked over with several inches of dry mud. “The problem is not the car,” said the mechanic. “It’s just smothered with dirt!” After a good power wash, David’s car ran like new again.

“Only then,” David concluded, “did I understand why a soul, as pure as a soul may be, might need a cleaning.”

**The Body Detox**

Your body is holy. It was chosen by its Creator as the sacred means by which the soul performs mitzvahs. That’s why it requires a sacred burial—just as we bury a Torah scroll.

By Jewish tradition, a group called the *chevra kadisha* prepares the body before burial by cleansing it and submerging it in a mikvah. We want to return our body to its Maker as pure as it was given to us.

But some of that cleansing is beyond the means of the *[chevra kadisha](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4107711/jewish/The-Chevra-Kadisha.htm%22%20%5Co%20%22The%20Chevra%20Kadisha)*. Everything you ever ate left its trace in the body. If you ate like Rabbi Yehuda, the *nassi*, all that you ingested was good and pure. Otherwise, your body requires a detox.

**How did Rabbi Yehuda, the *[nassi](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2110818/jewish/To-Be-a-Leader-of-the-Jewish-People.htm%22%20%5Co%20%22To%20Be%20a%20Leader%20of%20the%20Jewish%20People)*, eat?**

Rabbi Yehudah was the foremost leader of the Jewish people in the period after the Bar Kochba revolt. He redacted the final, official version of the Mishnah, the first *halachic* compendium. The *nassi* was the chief justice of the supreme court of Israel, the most prestigious and powerful position at the time. He is also often referred to in the Talmud as “our holy rebbe,” or just “Rebbe.”

**The**[**Talmud**](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2537389/jewish/Talmud.htm)**relates:**

At the time of Rebbe's death, he raised his ten fingers toward heaven and said, “Master of the Universe, it is revealed and known before You that I toiled with my ten fingers in the Torah, and I have not derived any benefit from the world even with my small finger.”7

Now, Rabbi Yehudah lived a grandly affluent life. People would say that his stable manager was wealthier than the Persian Emperor. He often hosted Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Emperor of Rome, who he matched in wealth. As far as austerity goes, the Talmud states that he had radish, lettuce, and cucumber on his table all year round, something quite rare in the centuries before refrigeration.

Yet, with all this wealth and condiments at his table, he never indulged in any of it for its own sake. To him, it was all a means to serve G‑d.8 All his food was therefore holy food.

True, that’s not easy. It’s a simple thing to live off bread and water or a bowl of rice and only eat for the “sake of heaven.” You’ll avoid that purging of the body after death. But G‑d created a variety of foods for a reason. It must be that we, like Rabbi Yehudah, are capable to some degree of consuming these, as well, for a higher purpose. Every detail of life, even its luxuries, can and must be used for a divine purpose.9

But let’s say you didn’t. Let’s say, once or twice in life you ate something with no higher purpose in mind. It was just time to eat. Or it looked good. Or it just happened to be there. So now your holy body has ingested food molecules that were never made holy like itself.

The body has to purge itself of this unholiness while it lies in the grave.10 That’s called a “thrashing of the body,” because it’s similar to hanging up a rug and thrashing the dust out with a stick. As the body decays in the soil, it is not completely dead. It is cleansing itself.

(There is an alternative way to give your body this cleansing: Make sure to speak words of Torah, whether that be Tehillim, [Mishnah](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4329319/jewish/The-Mishnah.htm), Talmud, or any other Torah words, for one-sixth of your day, or four hours.11)

**The Slingshot Cleanse**

As the body cleanses itself, so too the soul. Released from your physical bounds, you ascend into the ecstasy of a sublime, spiritual world. But you still haven’t let go of those thoughts, words, and activities of this world. They envelop your soul, throwing you back down into the experience of that same empty nonsense you were engaged in down here all over again, blocking the blissful experience you just tasted.

Now your soul truly feels the pain she underwent during her life in a body. That pain shakes off the aura of dust that surrounds her like a thick, dark coat.

Then you are slung back up again into the bliss of that higher world, only to discover that some residue of those ugly clothes persists. So you get pulled back down and the process is repeated until all the dust has been shaken off.12 You’re left with only the fine clothing of all your [mitzvahs](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1438516/jewish/Mitzvah.htm) and good deeds.

Because, just as an astronaut needs a special suit to protect him from the intense cosmic rays outside the earth’s atmosphere, so your soul will need the luminous clothing of Torah, mitzvahs, and good deeds she has brought from this world. Without them, she would dissolve within the intensity of heaven’s light. But if it’s soiled with this other junk, it’s not going to operate so well.

[**Gehinnom**](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1594422/jewish/Do-Jews-Believe-in-Hell.htm)

Once done shaking off the dust, there may be some deeper cleaning left in order to enter that higher world, cleaning that your soul can’t shake off on her own. For this, she must enter for a short period into Gehinnom, a spiritual realm that provides tailored cleansing for every stain.

The Gehinnom of Fire burns out the fiery passions of the animalistic soul that pulled you into unholy places. The Gehinnom of Snow extracts the cold apathy of the animalistic soul that held you back from doing mitzvahs. Once done, the soul is healed and fully equipped to absorb the rays of divine light shining in a world beyond.13

Nevertheless, it’s only the externalities of your divine soul that require cleansing. Although she suffers the consequences of carrying a thick coat of muck and grime both in this world and the next, she herself remains pure and untainted.14

No matter how long you live and what you do with that life, every morning you can wake up and say a blessing that begins, “My G‑d, the soul You have breathed into me is pure…”

She is, after all, a “part of G‑d from above.”15

**The Judgment and Rescue of Elisha ben Avuya**

A soul that needs this cleansing will run to Gehinnom to get it. The worst punishment is when they don’t let you in. The story of Elisha ben Avuya is a case in point:

Elisha ben Avuya is a dark character in Talmudic lore. He is often referred to as simply “the other.”16 He had been one of the most learned of the sages, and then turned to heresy. His student, Rabbi Meir, tried repeatedly to pull him back, but to no avail. He claimed he had heard a voice calling from the Holy of Holies, “Return, wayward children! Return—except for Elisha ben Avuya. For he knows My glory and nevertheless rebels against Me!”17

They tell that when this “other” died, he could go neither up nor down. The heavenly court refused to deal with him.

“We cannot sentence you,” they told him, “because the Torah you learned and taught will protect you from the fires of Gehinnom. But without going through those fires, neither can you enter the Garden of Eden above.”

Rabbi Meir, however, disagreed with their ruling. He reversed their logic: “Better that he be sentenced and endure those fires,” he argued, “so that he could receive the reward for all his Torah.”

“When I die,” Rabbi Meir concluded, “a pillar of smoke will rise from his grave.”

And so it was that when Rabbi Meir’s soul came to rest, smoke began to rise from the grave of his teacher.

How long did “the other” burn? Rabbi Meir was the teacher of Rabbi Yehudah, the Nasi. Rabbi Yehudah was the teacher of Rabbi Yochanan, who lived a long life. Throughout Rabbi Yochanan’s life, the grave of Elisha ben Avuya continued to smoke.

“If Job’s suffering would last for seventy years,” wrote Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, “it wouldn’t reach the pain of one hour in Gehinnom.”18 And here, this “other” endured perhaps a hundred years of such pain.

Until Rabbi Yochanan declared, “Is this the great favor that Rabbi Meir brought upon his teacher, that he burns all these years? One among the students of Torah stumbles and none of us can save him? I will enter Gehinnom, grab him by the hand, and pull him out from there! Who will be able to take him from me?!”

And so it was that when Rabbi Yochanan died, smoke ceased to rise from the grave of Elisha ben Avuya. Indeed, they eulogized Rabbi Yochanan, saying, “Even the guard at the gate of Gehinnom could not stand before you, our rabbi!”

Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, the “Ben Ish Chai,” asked, “How is it possible that Rabbi Yochanan could simply grab someone by the hand and pull him out of Gehinnom? How will the cleansing process ever be completed?”19

And so, he explains: It must be that the fires of Gehinnom were not able to complete the process. As the heavenly court had originally stated, the Torah that Elisha ben Avuya had learned shielded him from those fires. And so, it is with every student of Torah. Which is why the Arizal taught that the souls of Torah students can only be cleansed through reincarnation.20

That is what Rabbi Yochanan did. He took Elisha ben Avuya by the hand and guaranteed that he would continue holding his hand, coming with him through every incarnation, to ensure that he would not stumble again, until he could receive his portion in the World to Come.

Eventually, Elisha ben Avuya was admitted to the lowest level Garden of Eden above. It cost him a hundred years or so of unimaginable hell. But even to enter that lowest level, it was well worth it. There is no way we can begin to imagine the bliss of a cleansed and pure soul in that higher world.21

**Footnotes**

**[1.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnoteRef1a516993)** Avot 4:17.

[**2.**](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm#footnoteRef2a516993) Tanya, Chapter seven.

[**3.**](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm#footnoteRef3a516993) See Likutei Torah, Nasso 25c. Ibid, Korah 53d. Ibid, Matot 86b. Maamarei Admor Hazaken, Inyanim, Inyan Gehinnom. Tzemach Tzedek, Kitzurim V’ha’arot L’Tanya, page 41. Ibid, page 174.

**[4.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnoteRef4a516993)** The Scientist, Sept. 5, 2024: *Why Pain During Wound Healing May be a Good Sign.*UTHealth, Neuroscience Online: Chapter 6 – *Pain Pathways*.

**[5.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnoteRef5a516993)** See, for example, Harvard Medicine, Spring 2024: *Making Sense of Interoception.*

**[6.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnoteRef6a516993)** Biur Tanya, Kadaner, chapter eight.

[**7.**](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm#footnoteRef7a516993) [Ketubot 104a](https://www.chabad.org/torah-texts/5450493/The-Talmud/Ketubot/Chapter-12/104a).

[**8**.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm#footnoteRef8a516993) Rabbi Yeshaya Horowitz, Shnei Luchot Habrit, Asara Maamarot, Maamar 8.

**[9.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnoteRef9a516993)** Likutei Sichot, volume 31, page 176, footnote 61. Torat Menachem, volume 52, page 147ff.

[**10**.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm#footnoteRef10a516993) [Sanhedrin 87b](https://www.chabad.org/torah-texts/5458544/The-Talmud/Sanhedrin/Chapter-10/87b). Rashi ad loc. Tanya, chapters 7 & 8. Reishit Chochmah, Sha’ar Hayirah, 12. Sha’ar Hagilgulim, 23. In the latter two works, this process is described as a cleansing for the soul. Tanya, however, implies that the cleansing is for the body. [**11.**](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm#footnoteRef11a516993) Hayom Yom, 7 Tevet.

[**12.**](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm#footnoteRef12a516993) Likutei Torah, Pinchas 75c. Biur Tanya, Kadaner, chapter 8.

[**13.**](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm#footnoteRef13a516993) Maamarei Admor Hazaken, Inyanim, Inyan Malachim. Tzemach Tzedek, Kitzurim V’ha’arot L’Tanya, page 41. Ibid, page 174.

**[14.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnoteRef14a516993)** See, for example, Rabbi Dovber of Lubavitch, Sha’ar HaEmunah, chapter 26.

**[15](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnoteRef15a516993)**[.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnoteRef15a516993) [Job 3:12](https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/16405/jewish/Chapter-3.htm#v12). Tanya, chapter two.

[**16.**](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm#footnoteRef16a516993) Ben Ish Chai points out the connection in gematria: אלישע-רב=אחר

**[17.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnoteRef17a516993)** Chagiga 15b.

[**18.**](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm#footnoteRef18a516993) Ramban, Preface to the Book of Job.

[**19.**](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm#footnoteRef19a516993) Ad loc.

**[20.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnoteRef20a516993)** Sefer Hagilgulim, chapter 23.

**[21.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/516993/jewish/How-Does-Hell-Work.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnoteRef21a516993)** Tzemach Tzedek, Derech Mitzvotecha, P’ru Ur’vu.

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