

# CHAPTER 5: HEAVEN AND HELL □ PART 1

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

Let's make it clear from the outset: the realm we enter into after death is an altogether other order of being; it's neither this world nor the World to Come, though it shares elements of both. And it's essential to recall that the Afterlife is a way-station of sorts, not our final destination. It's where our life is reviewed, where debts are paid, and where we get used to being above and beyond life. It's also where the soul dwelt before it entered this world, as such Gan Eden is sort of the soul's "home" -- but not really, since our actual home is in G-d's Presence, in The Word to Come.

(It seems likely that there'd be an awkward albeit fascinating moment when it finally occurs to the newly-arrived soul that it's no longer bound by the ways of this world and it realizes that things are utterly different and with wholly other rules, but the tradition doesn't speak of that outright.)

In any event, the Afterlife is where the soul thrives on its own, free as it is from the confines of the body, and where it's thus able to be itself at last. But just like our situation here in the world where we're open to the consequences of being ourselves, since some would like us and do us favors while others would dislike us and harm us, the soul is likewise open to some pleasure and discomforts in the Afterlife. And so it's said to experience "Heaven" or "Hell" then depending upon its makeup. We'll first concentrate upon Heaven, which is termed Gan Eden (i.e., The Garden of Eden) in the Tradition.

The Jewish concept of Heaven (and of Hell) is different from others'. Many conceive of Heaven as the realm in which G-d abides, and where angels and the souls that have merited eternal life commune in everlasting bliss with Him. But G-d no more "abides" there more especially than anywhere else, for "The whole world" and all else besides "is full of His Glory" (Isaiah 6:13). It's also true that angels can dwell here on our plane, on higher ones, and on some of the very highest of all (some of which are even higher than Heaven), depending on their mission. And as we learned, eternal life is experienced in The World to Come.

In any event, the prophet Ezekiel depicted the original Garden of Eden which is analogous to the ethereal one as, "G-d's garden, where every precious stone was your covering (including) ruby, topaz, diamond, beryl, onyx, jasper, lapis lazuli, turquoise and emerald; and where gold, ... was in your midst" (Ezekiel 28:13). Of course this is to be taken metaphorically as far as the Afterlife is concerned, since that Gan Eden is utterly other-worldly. But the imagery is meant to evoke some of the preciousness and spiritual luster of the Afterlife experience.

Ramchal speaks of Gan Eden as being comprised of "several levels", and in fact we're told in other sources that there are seven levels in all. But Ramchal chose to focus on its relatively "upper" and "lower" levels apparently in keeping with the abbreviated nature of this work.

Souls dwell in the lower Gan Eden in a "body" that "resemble their earthly bodies somewhat", which is to say, in a sort of ethereal encasement that's loosely analogous to our physical bodies. And it seems that the experience there is also somewhat analogous to ours here, except that souls experience more "spiritual delights" than our own, as would befit them.

The upper level of Heaven, though, is "where souls dwell in their true essence". It's there where they experience "greater and higher spiritual delights than those in the lower Gan Eden". We're also told that the souls experiences a sense of the passing of time and of on-come of different "seasons", each one with its own delight, depending on the soul's level of advancement. That would explain the various discussions of otherworldly experiences of Shabbat and the Holy Days.

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