

## CHAPTER 5: HEAVEN AND HELL □ PART 2

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

Hell is termed "Gehenom" in Hebrew and is sometimes known as "The Netherworld". It's the unholy realm in which we bear the consequences of our bad ethical choices. But something needs to be emphasized here; for as Ramchal puts it, Gehenom is the place where "the soul is punished", not the body. That's to say, the sort of recompense and punishment we're speaking of here is an immaterial kind. Hence the idea that Hell is a black and fiery place of eternal torment for the damned, as it's usually taken to be, is absurd by our reckoning.

After all, if it was our bodies that experienced Gehenom, then we could conceivably be said to suffer the kind of hell-fire and brimstone that's associated with Hell. But that's not the case.

So some offered that the punishments depicted were metaphorical; they said that they stood for a sort of mental and emotional anguish of the soul. But while elevating the suffering to a non-material level of abstract anguish certainly separates it from the body, that's still only one step beyond an out-and-out a material understanding of it.

Yet the tradition is clear about the existence of Gehenom, and it certainly insists upon the reality of recompense for wrongdoing just as much as it's resolute about reward for goodness (which is why Ramchal equated the two when he said that "just as there are different degrees of punishment" in Gehenom, "there are likewise different degrees delight" in Gan Eden). So what is Gehenom all about after all?

It comes to this: the otherworldly suffering undergone in Gehenom is of a wholly spiritual kind that's set-off by what's termed elsewhere a "subtle, ethereal fire" (see Ramban's Sha'ar HaGemul) that's totally out of our experience -- just as out of our experience, by the way, as the immaterial mechanism that allows for the sort of otherworldly delight enjoyed in Gan Eden.

In any event, the Gehenom experience enables wrongdoers to be "expiated from their sins" and to then be "purified" enough to "be worthy of rewarded" In Gan Eden afterwards. For, we're taught that Gehenom is far from eternal. It usually only has to be endured for up to a year and no longer, after which the soul ascends to Gan Eden to join the others there. Some very few, very despicable individuals never make it to Gan Eden, though, and they're said to be completely "undone". But again, this is rare and only happens to a "miniscule minority" of individuals, as Ramchal puts it.

So let's sum up what Ramchal has said about the Jewish views of the fate of human souls after death, judgment, the Afterlife, and The End of Days. We learn that the soul is either ensconced in

Gan Eden (which Ramchal terms "The Soul World") or Gehenom after death as the body returns to its elements, or it's reincarnated; body and soul are then brought back to life after the Messianic Era; and the combination of the two is then allowed access to The World to Come.

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Rabbi Yaakov Feldman has translated and commented upon "The Gates of Repentance", "The Path of the Just", and "The Duties of the Heart" (Jason Aronson Publishers). His works are available in bookstores and in various locations on the Web.