

SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Do Jews Believe in Heaven and Hell?



Recently a Jewish student asked me if Jews believe in heaven and hell.

I explained that Judaism has a concept of heaven and hell but emphasized that we do not believe in eternal damnation.

Then I asked her why she asked this question. She told me she was curious because her Christian friends always spoke

about heaven and hell, but she had never heard about it at home or in Hebrew school.

Why do some religions obsess about heaven and hell?

So why do some religions obsess about heaven and hell while the Jewish bible hardly mentions it?

An answer to this question is found in this week’s Torah portion, *Toldos* (Genesis 25:19–28:9), where Isaac blesses his sons Jacob and Esau. Jacob is blessed with “*the dew of the heavens and the richness of the earth*” (Genesis 27:28), and Esau is blessed with “*the richness of the earth and the dew of the heavens*” (Genesis 27:39).

These blessings appear identical, except the order is reversed.

Our sages explain that both brothers receive spiritual blessings, “*the dew of heaven,*” and material blessings, “*the richness of the earth.*” However, by reversing the order, Isaac clarifies that Jacob’s priority is spirituality and Esau’s priority is material gain.

The Torah makes this distinction when it says, “*Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a wholesome man, dwelling in tents*” (Genesis 25:27).

Our sages also explain that “*the dew of heaven*” refers to the World to Come, and “*the richness of the earth*” refers to this world.

In the case of Esau, his blessing mentions earth first and then heaven, because his descendants will enjoy the pleasures of the earth and constantly yearn for the World to Come. Jacob’s descendants are first promised the heaven [World to Come], and second the physical world, not for mere pleasure, but as the means to achieve their spiritual goal.

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This is the secret of Jewish spirituality and how we are able to experience closeness to God. The Jewish people were instructed to use material objects to fulfill God's commandments [מצוות–mitzvot], which are manifestations of God's will and wisdom.

It is significant that the word מצוה–mitzvah [commandment] is etymologically related to the Aramaic word צוותא–tzavta, which means “connection.” It is through the physical commandments that finite man is able to connect to the infinite God and thereby acquire a portion in the World to Come.

This is why many Jews focus on good deeds and action and don't talk about heaven and hell. We focus on the means rather than the ends and simultaneously transform the world into a more refined and spiritual dwelling.

We also do not want the “promise of heaven” or fear of “eternal damnation” to taint our spiritual service with an ulterior motive.

The fear of hell or the promise of heaven and salvation could be a powerful bribe to believe a certain way.

The fear of hell or the promise of heaven and salvation could be a powerful bribe to believe a certain way, as it says, *“Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the righteous”* (Exodus 23:8).

Our sages put it this way, *“Do not be as servants who serve their master for the sake of a reward. Rather, be as servants who serve their master not for the sake of a reward. And let the fear of Heaven be upon you”* (Ethics of Our Fathers 1:3).

May this Shabbos provide opportunities to give thanks for the blessings we receive and for the opportunities to serve and connect to God without the temptation of ulterior motives.

Shabbat Shalom,

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