



# Journey of the Soul

## AN EXPLORATION OF LIFE, DEATH, AND WHAT LIES BEYOND

*A fascinating new six-session course from the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute*

**D**eath is the ultimate transition. Dreaded for the pain that often accompanies it, feared for its essential hiddenness, and obscured from our view by the signature limitations of our minds, how and what we think about death in many ways defines our life.

Philosophical and theological issues have been raised by thinkers around the world for as long as we have recorded them. Whether in Plato's *Phaedo*, or in Aristotle's *De Anima*, in the Upanishads, in Lao Tsu, or in Kant, Sartre, or Heidegger, great thinkers have mused on the topic of death. There are many recurrent questions: seeking its purpose, its justice, its aftermath, and whether consciousness survives it.

Then there are the more practical questions, raised by psychologists, therapists, and counselors, including Kubler-Ross, Frankl, and many others who ask what steps can be taken to live better in the face of death, whether our own or that of others. In particular, the profound emotions that come both from anticipating a death and from dealing with its aftermath challenge health professionals, clergy, and all who care.

As crystalized in the context Terror Management Theory<sup>1</sup>, we will learn how elements of Jewish culture help manage the terror of death including the belief in life after death, symbolic immortality and posterity. Comparing and contrasting, we will explore how classic texts and teachings from Judaism present an approach to death that is integrated with its unified approach to life, in which the ordinary is nested within an irreducible whole that contains and exceeds what we know so far.

---

<sup>1</sup> Originally proposed by social psychologists Drs. Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon and Tom Pyszczynski of the University of Arizona, this theory relates the psychological conflict of man's desire to live with the knowledge that death is unavoidable.

### **ACCREDITED FOR MEDICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS**

Earn up to 7.5 AMA, APA, NASW, and CBBS continuing education credits  
in joint sponsorship with the Washington School of Psychiatry



## Course Outline

### *Lesson One: Perspective*

---

Thanatophobia is defined as the fear of death; because of death's absoluteness and finality, fear may be an entirely appropriate response. Some thinkers believe, that what is unreasonable is the expectation that death ought not to be disquieting; yet many philosophers, from Plato on, have posited that the quest for immortality is the impetus behind many human endeavors. Thus, death—or our perspective of it—has a profound impact on our quality of life.

This lesson discusses how Mortality Salience (the awareness that death is inevitable) influences an individual's choices and how it interrelates with self-esteem. Fear of death is a primary motivation in human behavior.<sup>2</sup>

The lesson presents the Jewish perspective on death and belief in the immortality of the soul, which are connected with the Jewish perspective on life. Judaism's holistic approach to death entails that an understanding of death is coupled to an understanding of a dynamic of life. Constrained between a beginning and an end point, life finds meaning in choices that reflect purpose that endures beyond death, because any lesser goal is subject to extinction. The sense of mission within life, so crucial for mental and physical health (Viktor Frankl) is shaped by the acceptance of death's reality while transcending it.

### *Lesson Two: Preparation*

---

Having presented the central role of death in framing a holistic approach to life in the first lesson, this lesson explores how to allow death to enter our rational life. It examines the Terror Management Health Model<sup>3</sup> which allows the thought of death to be empowering and instrumental in conditioning healthy behavior.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is largely based on Psychologist Dr. Morton Levitt's interpretation of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker's assertion in *The Denial of Death*, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> A foundational hypothesis of the Terror Management Theory as set forth by Drs. J.L. Goldenberg and J. Arndt in *The Implications of Death for Health: A Terror Management Health Model for Behavioral Health Promotion: Psychological Review #115*, 2008.



This Lesson focuses on the way Judaism has removed the fear of death by incorporating it into the larger view of life, and how various teachings in Judaism enable a freedom to prepare for one's own death. Pragmatic responses to medical prognoses are integrated within the framework of faith, addressing problems of despair and depression that are commonly attendant on failing health. From this discussion flows a consideration of old age, with Judaism's emphasis on using, rather than squandering, the accumulated wisdom of the years and resulting salutary effects this has on individuals and on the community.

### *Lesson Three: Transition*

---

What happens when life as we know it ends and the soul passes to the "other side"? Does a person leave any real lasting impact on the world? Do loved ones maintain any connection to the souls of the deceased? In this lesson, we will analyze the Jewish traditions and customs surrounding death and burial as well as teachings from Jewish mysticism that explain the spiritual implications of these rituals. We will present sources from Kabbalah and the Talmud that illuminate Judaism's take on the soul's journey and its gradual ascension from this world to a higher plane. The study will provide insight on how these observances can be a source of comfort to loved ones in the throes of a recent loss.

### *Lesson Four: Afterlife*

---

For most people, the concepts of heaven and hell are a composite of many different religions and philosophies, some of them frightening. In this lesson, Judaism's conceptions of reward and punishment after death are compared and contrasted with the more common notions known in other cultures. A comparative on other topics of afterlife, such as reincarnation and ghosts, are also presented. Jewish practices, including the recitation of the Kaddish prayer and the observance of the anniversary of a passing, are presented in the context of the Jewish concept of the soul's afterlife as well as its enduring consciousness in this world.



### *Lesson Five: Mourning*

---

This lesson presents the Jewish perspective on mourning and its associated rituals, with the focus now placed on those who survive. The motif of an inclusive engagement is now expressed in the face of the irreducible sense of loss, which so often isolates mourners emotionally and spiritually from their community. Within Jewish customs, from the rending of the garments to observing shiva-house protocol, to lighting yahrtzeit candles and reciting Yizkor, this lesson shows how Jewish practices can be utilized as effective strategies to prevent isolation<sup>4</sup>. Channels of expression are opened for grief, thereby gradually providing tools to mourners to a reemerge into a “life after death<sup>5</sup>.” This lesson includes an approach for those offering comfort and consolation to the bereaved.

### *Lesson Six: The End*

---

What is the Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead? Is not heaven the final destination of the soul’s journey? Turning the widespread understanding on its head, we will present Judaism’s perspective on the goal of life’s journey. We will learn that it is not a pathway to an otherworldly paradise, but rather that everything ultimately leads back to this world of our experience, albeit in a perfected state. These insights provide the ultimate consolation to the mystifying defect that is death and also a life philosophy with a positive world view and a purposeful way of living.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Halakha as Psychology: Explicating the Laws of Mourning*, Professor Moshe HaLevy Spero, MSW

<sup>5</sup> In light of the research of Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi in *Posttraumatic Growth in Clinical Practice*