

“L’chaim, To life!”

Rosh Hashanah 5780

Eleanor Shellstrop¹ opened her eyes and looked at the wall directly across from her. Painted in bright, happy lettering were the words, “Everything is fine!” She smiled to herself and a moment later, a tall, white-haired man with a kind face invited her into his office. Apparently, Eleanor was dead, and this was where you go after you die. Well, that is, if you are lucky enough to enter the good place.

Many of you have probably heard of, or watched the hit NBC show, “The Good Place.” This hilarious comedy tells the tale of four individuals who died simultaneously, in different locations, from different causes, and entered the place reserved for a select few human beings. To be eligible for the “good place,” one must have earned enough points doing good things while alive to deserve their spot in this special, eternal existence.

Now, I can’t divulge too much more information about the show lest I ruin the plot. And boy, does this show have plot twists! But I will say this: Nothing in my life, whether it was a show, a personal experience, or even all of the Jewish learning I’ve done for years has impacted me and my behavior more than this sitcom.

It might seem strange to hear that from a rabbi. Why on earth would a network tv show have a greater influence on my life than, well, Judaism?? Even more so, why does a show premised on an imaginary (or possibly imaginary) afterlife, an afterlife that is not a part of Jewish tradition, have any sway on the way I choose to live my life?

For many of us, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur provide us with a reminder to check ourselves and make sure that we are doing all we can to be good. During these most holy days of the year, we turn our focus to the past year and ask forgiveness for all of our wrongdoings, we consider the year to come, and we make promises to do better, to be better. We are reminded of this yet again at the end of December when we receive an onslaught of advertisements encouraging us to lose weight, save more money, work harder, spend more time with family, make resolutions. As Jews, we are fortunate enough to get twice the guilt each new year.

¹ Character from “The Good Place,” © NBC Studios, Inc.

But what happens in between? What happens during the day to day, the hustle and bustle of our busy lives? How do we remember to maintain those promises and keep ourselves in check? And most importantly, what greater purpose is served by making good choices and behaving in a certain manner? Personally, while I believe that the High Holy Days remind me to take time for *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, an accounting of my soul, and that they provide a not-so-gentle nudge to apologize and correct my transgressions from the past year, “The Good Place” has provided me with something more. This comedy makes me think about every single thing I do, every single day, not just the obvious wrongs. On the High Holy Days, we begin the process of atoning; on “The Good Place,” every action, even ones that appear virtuous may actually be unknowingly cruel or immoral.

If we are to believe the basis of this popular show, that there is indeed a “good place,” it indicates that there is also a “bad place.” Essentially, this show suggests that there is a place for us after we die, and that our actions in life will impact where we go. Now, in Judaism, we often avoid talking about life after death. Many times, students, both children and adult have asked me, “What do Jews believe happens after we die?” Unfortunately, the answers aren’t always so clear. The truth is that we just don’t know. We have theories, we have concepts, we have texts. But to truly know means to be, dead. As Maurice Lamm explains in his famous book, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, “The conviction in a life after death, unproveable but unshakeable, has been cherished since the beginning of thinking man’s life on earth.”² As Lamm explains, it’s unproveable, but we can’t help but think that there is something more to life after death. The mystery of death remains a prominent concern for most people, especially Jews. Many rabbis have sought answers and provided ample commentary to help us better understand our individual fates. One such commentary comes from the Talmud in the Rosh Hashanah tractate. We read:

² Lamm, Maurice, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Jonathan David Publishers, New York, NY, 1969.

...It is taught in a *baraita*: Beit Shammai say: There will be three groups of people on the great Day of Judgment at the end of days: One of wholly righteous people, one of wholly wicked people, and one of middling people.

Wholly righteous people will immediately be written and sealed for eternal life. Wholly wicked people will immediately be written and sealed for Gehenna, as it is stated [in] (Daniel 12:2): “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall wake, some to eternal life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

Middling people will descend to Gehenna to be cleansed and to achieve atonement for their sins, and they will cry out in their pain and eventually ascend from there, as it is stated [in] (Zechariah 13:9): “And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried; they shall call on My name, and I will answer them.”

This is referring to the members of the third group, who require refinement and cleansing. And about them, Hannah said [in] (I Samuel 2:6): “The Eternal kills and gives life; God brings [us] down to the grave and brings up [life].” Beit Hillel say: God Who is “abundant in kindness” (Exodus 34:6) tilts the scales in favor of kindness, so that middling people should not have to pass through Gehenna. And about them, David said: “I love the Eternal, Who hears my voice and my supplications” (Psalms 116:1). And about them, David said the entire passage: “I was brought low and God saved me” (Psalms 116:6). Although they are poor in mitzvot, God saves them.³

As you can tell, there are some rabbis that ascribe to very specific beliefs about life after death. And through their commentary, they attempt to persuade people that the actions they take during life have a grave impact on what is to come. While these commentaries offer us a variety of suggestions and ideas, they are the opinions of a select few. And, with this many differing opinions, there is not one set answer for the Jewish belief in life after death.

³ Talmud, Tractate Rosh Hashanah 16b:12-17a:2

However, this selection from the Talmud gives way to an important concept, that perhaps there are people in this world who are neither wholly good, or wholly bad, that there are those who fall somewhere in the middle. Of course, “The Good Place” also provides us with the same suggestion. Halfway through the first season, we are introduced to the “medium place,” an eternal existence for the individuals (but in the case of the show, one individual) who were so middle of the road in life, they did not neatly fit into either the good or bad place.

Based on the Talmud’s interpretation, the majority of us would most likely claim to be “middling” people. We are the ones who have the opportunity to make changes, to fix our behavior and do things right, to learn how to become better. The Talmud states that in order to become good, we must first descend to Gehenna to achieve true atonement, but I reject this notion. We have the opportunity here and now to make amends, to get it right, to assure our reservation in the good place, or be sealed for eternal life, or whatever eternal existence you believe occurs after death.

But, without knowing with absolute certainty what will happen after death, we don’t really have a carrot dangling on a stick encouraging us to behave well and make good choices. Or do we? You may have heard people say, or maybe you yourself have muttered, “That’s what Yom Kippur is for” when you’ve done something wrong. The truth of the matter is, one day alone cannot necessarily undo all of our sins, even if we’re really, really sorry. We actually have to work each and every day to make it right, to assure that we’re not only living good lives, but that we’re doing the work that will potentially earn us a spot in a place reserved for those who were truly good people.

This also begs the question, what if there is nothing after you die? What then? Why should our attention and focus on every day living be centered on our eternal existence if there really isn’t one? As the 14th Dalai Lama famously said, “We are visitors on this planet. We are here for ninety or one hundred years at the very most. During that period, we must try to do something good, something useful, with our lives. If you contribute to other people’s happiness, you will find the true goal, the true meaning of life.” If we take his words to heart, the good we do in life will be enough, whether there is life after death, or not.

So then, how can we do good? What changes must be made to assure that we are contributing to other people's happiness, and to our own? Will that be enough to grant us a reservation in the good place, should it exist? And, what guidance does Judaism provide to help us in life and possibly, after death?

We often look to the wisdom of our ancient sages, the rabbis who spent their entire lives contemplating the deeper meanings of our texts, considering the true purpose of our lives and our deeds. These texts often provide us with a sense of direction and help us determine how best to live our lives. And, they may even help us to understand ourselves a little bit better. In Pirkei Avot, the collection of wise advice from our ancestors, we find this resource:

There are four temperaments among [people]:

The one who says, "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours," that's an average temperament.

[A second type is one who says], "What is mine is yours, and what is yours is mine," that's an uneducated person.

[A third type is one who says,] "What is yours is mine, and what is mine is mine," that's a wicked person.

[A final type is one who says,] "What is mine is yours, and what is yours is yours," that's a pious person.⁴

According to the text, are you an average person? Or wicked? Perhaps you're truly pious? However you define yourself, this text gives us a basic guideline to determine where we fit into the grand spectrum of people. How we treat others, and how we treat ourselves can significantly influence our possible existence after death. But, most importantly, and most timely, our temperament in life, our deeds and actions, and the respect we give to those around us will have a profound impact on our lives right now, the moments we spend with each other in *this* very moment.

⁴ Pirkei Avot 5:10

As we consider the next year and the opportunity to start anew, we also take a moment to pause and contemplate who we are, what we can do differently, and how we need to change to be the very best version of ourselves. Let us take this instant to be thoughtful about the year to come, not just because we want to be sealed in the Book of Life. Let us contribute to other people's happiness, including our own. Let us make changes in our day to day life that have a positive, lasting impact on ourselves and our community. Let us fulfill mitzvot that help to create peace and bring more joy into the entire world. May this New Year be the year that we establish a good place here on Earth during our lifetimes, a place filled with light and love. May it be a good, sweet, and blessed year for you all. Amen. Shana Tova.