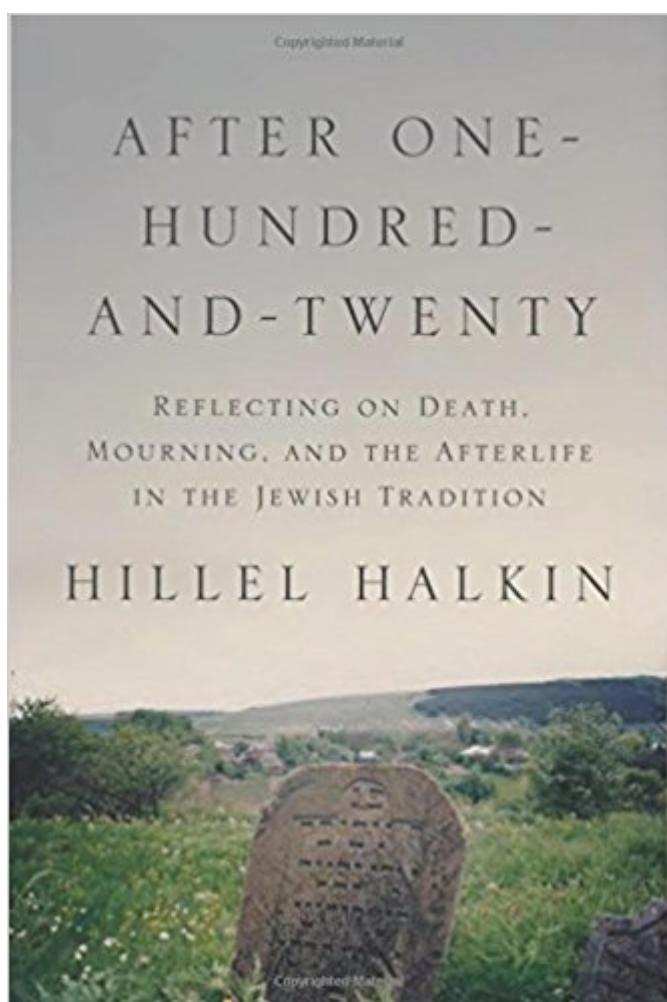


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After One-Hundred-and-Twenty: Reflecting On Death, Mourning, And The Afterlife In The Jewish Tradition (Library Of Jewish Ideas)



Synopsis

After One-Hundred-and-Twenty provides a richly nuanced and deeply personal look at Jewish attitudes and practices regarding death, mourning, and the afterlife as they have existed and evolved from biblical times to today. Taking its title from the Hebrew and Yiddish blessing to live to a ripe old age--Moses is said to have been 120 years old when he died--the book explores how the Bible's original reticence about an afterlife gave way to views about personal judgment and reward after death, the resurrection of the body, and even reincarnation. It examines Talmudic perspectives on grief, burial, and the afterlife, shows how Jewish approaches to death changed in the Middle Ages with thinkers like Maimonides and in the mystical writings of the Zohar, and delves into such things as the origins of the custom of reciting Kaddish for the deceased and beliefs about encountering the dead in visions and dreams. After One-Hundred-and-Twenty is also Hillel Halkin's eloquent and disarmingly candid reflection on his own mortality, the deaths of those he has known and loved, and the comfort he has and has not derived from Jewish tradition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a beautifully written book about Jewish views and traditions regarding death and afterlife, woven together with accounts of the author's own experiences with mourning and with contemplating and preparing for his own death. There were some marvelous and, in my view, at least, fascinating Jewish texts included, including a midrash that in paradise everyone is grouped with members of his or her own profession, and Maimonides' view that there will continue to be rich

and poor even in the world to come. Halkin is particularly attentive to how Jewish mourning traditions and views of the afterlife evolved over time; the regular recitation by mourners of the prayer known as kaddish, for example, "appears first to have become a daily practice in thirteenth-century Germany, from where it spread gradually to the rest of Ashkenazi Europe and beyond." This material is unavoidably somewhat morose, but Halkin, who was my former colleague at the New York Sun and the Forward, is good, amiable company in confronting it and guiding readers through it. I hope he lives long enough to write more books as edifying as this one.

The first (and best) two-thirds of this book surveys Jewish views of the afterlife. Halkin notes that the Torah's oldest books (the Five Books of Moses and the early writings such as Samuel) seem to treat the afterlife as "Sheol"- a realm where all are "gathered to their fathers" and sleep with occasional disturbances, regardless of their conduct in this world. Halkin suggests that this view made sense in a clan society, where people lived in small villages surrounded by their extended family. In such a world, he reasons, being surrounded by your clan after death seems only right (though his view does seem to conflict with the Patriarchs' nomadic lifestyle). By contrast, in Second Temple times and thereafter, Jews moved around the world, became split into factions, and were stuck with foreign oppression. In such a world, being "with your fathers" didn't seem like a practical goal, and punishing bad guys seemed more important. So the ideas of reward and punishment in the afterlife became more prominent. The last third or so of the book is about Halkin's own practices and those of his parents. I found this material less compelling than his historical speculation.

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Not what I was expecting, namely customs, beliefs, and modern practices.

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