Judaism and the Belief in an Afterlife

TO THE EDITOR: In her article, "The Effect of Values and Culture on Life-Support Decisions," Jill Klessig, MD, emphasizes the importance of health professionals understanding diverse beliefs around life-and-death issues. She goes so far as to say that "It is unacceptable for a health professional to be ignorant or insensitive to the cultural beliefs of a dying patient."[1] She concludes her discussion on Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews by categorically asserting that "... Jews do not have the same belief in an afterlife or reincarnation that other faiths do."

This is not so. Judaism has always maintained a belief in an afterlife.[2] Passages in the Hebrew Bible range from implications on the fate of the individual after death (2 Kings 2:11; Samuel 28:8ff) to more explicit formulations of the doctrine of resurrection of the dead (Daniel 12:2; Isaiah 26:19; Ezekiel 37:1ff).

Post-Biblical Jewish literature, especially the Talmud and Midrash, contains a variety of teachings concerning the fate of the soul after death, messianic redemption *(yimot ha-mashiach)*, resurrection of the dead *(techiyat ha-meytim)*, and the world to come *(olam ha-ba)*. In the 12th century, the great physician and theologian, Maimonides, formally incorporated the Talmudic belief in resurrection into the 13 fundamental principles of Jewish faith.

Jewish mystical belief in reincarnation of the soul *(gilgul)* emerged as a major theme in Kabbalistic literature in medieval times and subsequently penetrated many areas of popular faith and custom in Jewish communities throughout Europe, Asia, and North Africa.[3] The neokabbalistic renaissance of the 16th century, which emphasized concepts of the transmigration of souls, served as a prelude to the development of Hasidism.[4]

In the United States today, there is a broad spectrum of belief among Jewish people regarding life after death. To be sure, many Jews living under the influence of modern secular culture doubt the existence of life after death. Others, however, among them Reform and Reconstructionist Jews, while unable to accept a literal belief in resurrection, do affirm some notion of the soul living on after death. Still others, especially those who follow Orthodox and Conservative liturgies and traditions, continue to affirm the traditional belief in God "who revives the dead" *(mechayeh meytim)*.

In general, we should be careful not to assume absolute correlations between affiliation with any of these modern Jewish religious movements and a personal belief or lack of belief in an afterlife. When faced with life-and-death decisions pertaining to Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews, health care professionals would do well to follow the recommendations Dr Klessig outlines for patients from any culture—to explore their individual feelings and beliefs regarding the sanctity of life and their definition of death. In addition, it is usually helpful to encourage consultation with the family and, if appropriate, with the rabbi of their choice.

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Dr Klessig Responds

TO THE EDITOR: I appreciate Dr Madorsky's comments and discussion. I believe, however, she has misinterpreted what I said in my article, "The Effect of Values and Culture on Life-Support Decisions."[1] In my paragraph on non-Orthodox Jews (p 319), when discussing possible reasons for the large contrast between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews, I said that the belief in an afterlife or reincarnation was not the same in non-Orthodox Jews as it is in other religions. I did not state, nor mean to imply that in Judaism there is *no* belief in some form of life continuing on after death, just that it is dissimilar from other religious beliefs. This difference may account for differences in decisions about terminating life support and was cited by several patients in the study. In her letter, Dr Madorsky actually says the same thing.

I regret if my phrasing of the sentence in question led to a misunderstanding. Perhaps the best way of looking at religious beliefs is as a framework on which people build. Although the foundations may be the same, the final product, individual religious belief systems, is very different. Thus, as I said in my article, all persons must be treated as individuals first, not as stereotyped members of a cultural group.

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Correction

TO THE EDITOR: I wish to point out a small error in the November issue. In the first paragraph of the excellent article on radiation retinopathy by Zamber and Kinyoun,[1] Henri Coutard's name is misspelled.

Dr Coutard is generally regarded as the father of fractionation. His landmark presentation at the International Congress of Oncology in Paris in 1922 demonstrated that laryngeal carcinoma could be successfully treated using fractionation without disastrous complications. Dr Coutard continued his work with fractionation and eventually refined his treatment schedules to the extent that they are the basis for modern radiation therapy.[2,3]

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