



Journey of the Soul

A fresh look at life, death and the rest—in peace

Death has earned itself negative ratings in the human psyche. It can trigger fear of the unknown, dread at the likelihood of suffering, despair over the termination of relationships, and injustice at the interruption of life. Death is a feature of the human condition that—often without our conscious awareness—wields disproportionate influence on how we live our lives.

The force of this dynamic inspired the scholars and researchers at the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute (JLI) to create a groundbreaking six-week course, *Journey of the Soul: A fresh look at life, death and the rest—in peace*.

There is no shortage of classic material on the topic of mortal demise. Philosophical and theological discussions have survived their ancient authors in scripts such as Plato's *Phaedo*, Aristotle's *De Anima*, and in the texts of the Upanishads and Lao Tsu. Psychologists from Freud and Frankl, to Kubler-Ross, Klass and Rubin have proposed coping strategies. Mortal minds wrestle with the purpose, justice, and the aftermath of death. Their findings influenced the approaches of health professionals, clergy, and others attempting to heal hurting hearts.

However, there exists an entire corpus of largely untapped wisdom and tradition that has influenced global discourse indirectly, but deserves to be explored as a direct fountain of insight. It is the combined wisdom of Jewish teachings and experience, amassed and honed for over three millennia by the collective efforts of disciplined and creative scholars and spiritual mystics.

Journey of the Soul delves into the sea of Jewish insight and emerges with a transformative approach to death that is seamlessly integrated with the Jewish view of life. The

results supply an authentic and organic package of comfort, understanding, empowerment, practical guidance, healing, and hope. Most importantly, the course reframes its students' approach to life.

Lesson Topics

■ SESSION ONE

Demystifying Death: Perspective on Life and Beyond

Our natural response to the finality inflicted by death is thanatophobia, the fear of death. That presents a serious detraction to life, for the psychological community concurs that our perspective of demise profoundly impacts our quality of life. This lesson explores Judaism's holistic view of life and death and demonstrates that life finds meaning in choices that reflect matters that endure beyond death—because any lesser goal is subject to extinction. It explores the soul's immortality and the ramifications of this doctrine on our choices in life.

■ SESSION TWO

Taking Leave: Our Evolving Relationship with the Departed

Judaism provides a concrete set of practices and responses to the process of dying and the period following a death. These are informed by the revelation that death is an act of liberation for the spiritual energy and consciousness that was bound to a mortal body during its lifetime. This lesson explores these practices, the various stages of a soul's liberation, and the powerful "post-partem" relationship of the deceased's soul and its loved ones left behind—a relationship reflected in the Jewish rites of the funeral, burial, mourning, and the like. The lesson also examines the sanctity of corporeal remains, and the consequent response of Jewish practice.

■ SESSION THREE

The Mourning After: Grief and Consolation

To those left behind, a passing forms a painful void. This lesson focuses on the survivors and mourners, and explores the Jewish perspective of mourning and its associated rituals—such as garment-rending, the shiva protocol, memorial candles, and reciting Kaddish and Yizkor. It examines perceptions of isolation that may besiege mourners, and Judaism's response in practice and in perspective. It offers channels of expression to relieve crushing grief, anger, and guilt, and the tools of gradual emergence to life. Finally, it extends detailed guidance to those seeking to console the bereaved.

■ SESSION FOUR

Where We Go: Heaven and Hell

This lesson examines Jewish mystical sources that explore the experiences that individuals face upon their departure from corporeal life. It clarifies concepts such as paradise and hell, contrasts the Jewish perspectives from highly familiar but highly divergent non-Jewish notions of such concepts, and addresses the function and our approach toward such celestial experiences. The lesson sets the Jewish ritual responses to death, including the recitation of Kaddish, within the context of the afterlife of the departed soul, focusing on the continuing bonds between souls in heaven and those dear to them on earth.

■ SESSION FIVE:

Where We Go Again: Understanding Reincarnation

The concept of reincarnation sits squarely within the purview of mystical enlightenment. This lesson draws on the teachings of kabbalah and Jewish mysticism to define the uniquely Jewish understanding of returning souls, and to examine the purpose, scope, and details of the our mission in life. The lesson clarifies the balance of individual versus shared identities, and sets the journeys of individual souls within the context of the overall human mission, demonstrating the cosmic implications of an individual's choice of action.

■ SESSION SIX:

Life Is Short-ish: How Death Informs Life

This final lesson aptly demonstrates how Judaism presents the phenomenon of death as crucial to framing a holistic approach to life. In doing so, it replaces the paralyzing fear of passing with a rational and spiritual approach, providing the freedom to be comfortable with mortality. It strips death of its finality, offers enormous psychological relief, and harnesses our recognition of mortality as a means to capitalize on the preciousness of life. The angel of death is reassigned as the agent of impetus who guides us to focus on pursuits that are aligned with the eternal values of the spirit.

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