

HUM 114

Jews believe in hell, but let's not go there

Do Jews believe in hell? Where is it in the Bible?

D., Palm Beach, Fla.

Judaism teaches about hell but has different notions about it than Christianity. There is a valley just south of Jerusalem called *gei hinnom* ("the Valley of Hinnom") in the Hebrew Bible. This was a place where the Canaanite religion required that children be sacrificed to the god Moloch. For this reason, the valley was cursed and became, over time, the accepted name for hell.

Hell, like paradise, was created by God. In the apocryphal Book of Enoch and in the post-biblical work called the Talmud, more speculations were added to this rather minimal reference in the Hebrew Bible. Some of these ideas are also found in the writings of the Persians and Greeks. In those legends, the entrance to hell in the valley near Jerusalem is considered one of three on earth; another is under the sea, a third is in the desert. The valley entrance is between two palm trees, down a hole that's always filled with smoke.

The mouth of the entrance to hell is narrow and keeps the smoke from rising and revealing the exact location of the place.

Hell is huge and divided into seven different areas. In hell, a fiery river flows over the heads of sinners, and this fire is 60 times hotter than any earthly fire. There is a smell of sulfur in Gehenna.

An angel-prince is in charge of Gehenna — the devil, Satan. The basic belief is that sinners go directly to hell after death, while the righteous go directly to paradise — *olam habah* ("the world to come").

At birth, a place is reserved for each person in both heaven and hell, and at death, after a final judgment is made by God of our life's deeds, either the space in heaven or the one in hell is given up.

Most souls after death are not sent to heaven or hell immediately but rather remain in a place of judgment and purification (purgatory for Christians) for up to one year as they learn why they were afraid and why they were cruel. Christians have much more elaborate beliefs about the nature of purgatory.

About all these scary legends, we have no comment or opinion. We've never liked the idea of doing good just to avoid hell or doing good just to get a ticket into heaven. Goodness is its own reward and wickedness its own punishment. Hell, to us, is living without hope, and the main purpose of faith — all faiths — is to save people from hell.

On the question of cloning, I've been wondering: If a person is cloned (which seems likely in the near future), would



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the original person share his or her soul with the newly cloned "twin," or would the cloned person acquire his or her own soul? I realize the answer can only be your opinion, but I respect both of you for your insights into such difficult questions.

L., via e-mail

The process of cloning creates a new person with the same DNA as the original person. However, this is just like the natural process in which two identical twins share the same DNA after the original embryo splits. Your clone, for example, would be just like a twin except for the very important fact that twins have a mother and father and a clone has just one clonester (our term).

The soul of a clone and its clonester would be as separate and distinct as the souls of twins. The difference is, twinning is a phenomenon of natural procreation, while cloning is an act of genetic manufacturing. What's clear to most people who think and feel is that human beings are not products to be manufactured for vanity or for farming their organs.

People are a gift from God or the result (depending on your faith commitments) of natural procreation. Reproductive cloning is not just a frightening prospect but a perversion of science and a destruction of the unique nature and destiny of all human beings.

Some argue that animal husbandry has already dangerously altered the gene pool of the animals that share our earth. Treating people like chickens or cattle would transform humans into mere commercial by-products. Wherever that leads, it cannot be good.

Our souls are unique gifts, and so are our lives. Leaving things that way seems the least we can do to preserve the variety of life we've been entrusted to guard and nurture.

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