

What is Gehinnom

Horav Shabsi Yudelevitz, zl, tells the story of a maggid, preacher, who traveled from town to town lecturing on ethical behavior and mitzvah observance. He once came to a small community, far-off the beaten path, and began to exhort the members of the community with a passionate, fiery speech. His words, which emanated from his heart, entered into the hearts of his listeners, especially when he described the punishment associated with Gehinnom, Purgatory, and the reward of Gan Eden, Paradise. Within a few days, a change was noticed in the community, as mitzvah observance increased and ethical behavior came into vogue. Certainly, everyone wanted to obtain his portion in the World to Come. Well, almost everybody. There was one man who approached the maggid and publicly declared, "Rebbe, I want to go to Gehinnom!" "Gehinnom?" asked the maggid. "Are you sane? Why would you want to go to Gehinnom?"

"Rebbe, listen to me. Let me explain the rationale for my statement," the villager replied. "Let us imagine that after I have lived my 'one hundred and twenty' years, I arrive at my rightful place in Gan Eden. What will I do there in the company of all the righteous, the rabbanim and the tzaddikim? My entire life I have lived among the common folk, the simple Jew. I am comfortable with them, because I can converse with them. What am I going to do in the company of the righteous? With whom will I speak? In Gehinnom, I will feel at home!"

The maggid looked at this simple Jew and said, "My friend, you are greatly mistaken. You think that in the World of Truth you will meet up with your friends? No. When the time comes for your soul to return to its source, you will discover that it is not the way you think. Gan Eden is filled with incredible light. Joy abounds everywhere. Tzaddikim are seated together, all basking in the shine of the Shechinah. They have the opportunity to meet those who have lived a life of righteousness, piety and ethics.

"Conversely, in Gehinnom, darkness prevails. One person neither sees another nor even lifts a hand to him. In Gehinnom, a person is all alone in the darkness. It is solitary confinement at its nadir."