



# The Difference Between Heaven and Hell

*Hasidic Judaism - Lithuania*

It is said that the wise Rabbi Haim of Romshishok –an itinerant preacher– spent many years rummaging through the books of Hebrew wisdom in search of a way to cross the veil that separates us from the other world. He wanted to know what ‘the other side’ was like, in order to better explain to his audiences the deepest mysteries of the spiritual life. Finally, one day, after decades of tireless searching through thick volumes and deep meditations, he managed to reach his goal: he created a sharp blade with magical properties, capable of tearing the veil that separates both worlds. And, thus, Rabbi Haim of Romshishok entered the world which is beyond.

He felt a strange bliss when he emerged into the middle of a sunny green meadow covered with flowers. Before him stretched rows and rows of tables, about which people sat as if for a nuptial feast. The tables were overflowing with delicacies and the finest and most delicious drinks imaginable. The rabbi licked his lips at the thought of feasting on so much exquisiteness. He could smell the tantalising aroma of the fine stews that the crowd would enjoy. But suddenly he realised something that surprised him greatly: the people did not look happy, as would have been the case at a wedding feast. Quite the opposite. People were sad and anxious, eager, almost desperate. And what is more, they were thin and emaciated, all skin and bones. What was happening here?

As he drew closer, the rabbi realised what the problem was. Braids of angel hair held their elbows straight so that they could not bend their arms, and the only silverware they could use were excessively long silver spoons and forks. Because their elbows were immobilised, they were unable to get the food into their mouths. They were all terribly hungry! And their torture was even more cruel because of the fact of having such delicious and abundant delicacies in front of them but out of reach.

The rabbi was dismayed to see so much suffering and, unable to bear the contemplation of so much pain, he returned to his world to mitigate his grief and put order to his thoughts. What he had seen must have been hell. But hell was not as he had imagined it to be.

The next day, after he had recovered a little from his grief, he decided to cross the veil again, but choosing to tear the air in a different direction. Surprisingly, he found himself in the same place, or so it seemed. On the wide green meadow under the sun, there were rows and rows of tables with the most succulent foods and drinks that any human could imagine. But this time people were chatting animatedly, laughing and even singing. These people were radiating so much happiness that the rabbi felt his heart rising towards the sun.

As he drew closer, he could see that these people also had their elbows tightly bound with angel hair braids, immobilising their arms. In addition, their silver cutlery was also excessively long. Why were these people so happy, when they were being subjected to the same conditions as those in hell?

As he watched, a woman used her spoon to scoop out some stew and feed it to the man across from her. All up and down the tables, people were feeding each other, so that no one went hungry. Without a doubt, this must be heaven!

An idea passed through his mind.

With an agile movement, he pulled out the magic blade and deftly ripped the air in the same direction he had done the previous day, thereby opening a door between heaven and hell. He passed cleanly to the other side and ran to the nearest tables of hell. Grabbing a man by the arm, he said:

‘You do not have to keep suffering! Feed your neighbour across the table and he will feed you!’

But the man did not want to pay attention to him, nor did the woman he went to next, nor the next, nor the old man at the end of the table, who responded with a grimace of displeasure:

‘Do you tell me to feed the stupid man in front of me? Never! I’d rather go hungry than give something to someone so mean!’

Then Haim understood that the difference between heaven and hell was in the hearts of people, knowing in this way the great secret that was hidden on the other side of the veil.

Deeply moved, he lowered his head and returned home, thinking about the profound lesson he had learned ... he did not realise that he had left the veil torn between heaven and hell.

Not long after, the inhabitants of heaven noticed the crack and looked through. They were shocked to see the overwhelming torture suffered by the people in hell, and they realised that they would never feel happy again, knowing that, just on the other side of the thin veil, there were so many people suffering unspeakably.

At last, their deep compassion led them to cross to the other side to try and alleviate the suffering of their neighbours. The people from heaven were not well received, of course, but they thought that, with time, the inmates of hell would end up getting used to them and learn how to feed each other.

Thus began the end of all the hells. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2019).

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## Comments

Known as the Allegory of the Long Spoons, this parable can be found in very different traditions. In addition to the Hasidic Jewish tradition,

there are versions in Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and in Near Eastern stories. This story appears in medieval Europe as well as in traditional China, where the spoons were replaced with long chopsticks.

## Sources

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## *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

The Way Forward: This requires a change of mind and heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility.

## *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Preamble: Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility,

identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

