

Franz Kafka once wrote an essay in which he described his feelings about the death of his sister. She was sixteen years old when she died, and Kafka tells how he was unable to find any comfort or consolation. She was so pure, so good, so kind. He asked himself how God could take this child. Why?

One day, Kafka says, he walked into a kabbalistic shul, where a group of mystics were discussing their concept of life after death. He listened intently as they described the next world where, they affirmed, there are ten spheres.

At the very center, said the mystics, is God and all the righteous. And then, in each progressively larger sphere, are millions and millions of souls. When a person is about to be born, a soul is sent from one of these spheres to join the body. The soul is told: "You have twenty years, or eighty years, or sixty years. At the end of that time, you will be recalled. If you have influenced the body toward goodness, you will be promoted from the tenth sphere to the ninth sphere. Then you will return to God or to the next world and after a brief respite be sent down to earth again.

The goal of each soul is to progress from the tenth sphere to the very central sphere. Then the soul no longer has to return to earth. It finds eternal peace.

This theory helped the mystics understand life. When you meet people who are very cruel or selfish, they said, don't criticize them too much. Perhaps they weren't lucky. They may have received a soul from the tenth sphere. Or when you meet people who are very kind, very compassionate, who are very giving and generous, don't praise them too much. Perhaps they were lucky and got a soul from the third sphere, which had already been down to earth countless times.

And then Kabbalists said, when a young child dies, don't cry too much, because in all likelihood that soul needed to come to earth for just a brief time in order to be purified so it could join God in paradise.

Kafka concludes the essay and says, "I walked out of that shul and for the first time I had peace of mind. Now I knew where my sister was."

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