

Yom Kippur 5766

The Resurrection of the Dead

Good yontif.

This morning, I ask you to venture with me to a most sacred place. I want you to join me on a visit to the ICU at Mass General where we find someone who is terminally ill. She knows that recovery is unlikely, that the medical outlook is grim, that death is lurking at the door. I have taken her hand, and we have prayed together when, in between labored breaths, she says to me,

“Rabbi, I am not afraid of dying. It's not even the pain, but I want to know what happens after death. What does Judaism tell me? I understand and hope that my soul will live on, but will I ever see my children again? Will I ever see my husband again? Is there any existence like the one I have known on earth?” ...

She falls back on her pillow. What words can I bring to fill that silence?

At this moment, I have no choice but to provide an answer. At other times, lying awake at night, praying or studying, I struggle with this question myself. But at this moment, my friend does not need to hear my struggles; she does not need a course in theology. She needs comfort in the face of her illness and requires an honest, caring, and comprehensible response.

Judaism has a wide spectrum of beliefs about the world to come and about resurrection, and it is hard to reduce my theological quest to one simple answer. What does Judaism believe about resurrection? What do I, personally, believe? And, what comfort can I provide?

I've read the sources. I've read the Bible, the Tanakh. I've read *Hazal* – what the rabbis have to say about this. I studied medieval Jewish philosophy, and I'm somewhat familiar with modern thought. What do I think about the resurrection of the dead?

I always want to give people who are in pain a truthful and honest answer. I want to connect with them and tell them what I deeply feel at that moment. What do I believe?

But this woman is waiting for my words.

The standard biblical view of death is that death is a human being's final state. An example of this can be found in the book of Job:

“Remember that my life is a breath, my eye will not again see good. A cloud dissolves and is gone, so is one who descends to Sheol. He will not ascend.”¹

Throughout most of the Hebrew Bible, there is no sense of either the immortality of the soul – that there is a soul component separate from the body that continues to live beyond the body – or of the resurrection of the body and its return to life.

¹ Job 7:7-9.

Toward the end of the biblical period, however, the book of Daniel does contain the idea of resurrection. The text states:

“Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence. And the knowledgeable will be radiant like the bright expanse of sky, and those who lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever.”²

So which is it: death as it appears in most of the Bible? Or is there more to existence than this earthly realm?

I want to give this woman a thoughtful answer.

Resurrection has always been a tricky topic for Jews, especially since the birth of Christianity with its claim that Jesus was resurrected. At the same time, our rabbis considered the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead to be one of the central doctrines of Judaism. The tenth chapter of the Mishnah Sanhedrin begins:

“All of Israel has a portion in the world to come. As it is said, ‘People are all righteous. In the end, they shall inherit the land.’³ And the following has no portion in the world to come – the one who says there is no resurrection of the dead.”

The rabbinic idea of resurrection enables our souls to reunite with our bodies that have been returned to life at the end of time. As the great Christian scholar of Judaism, George Foote Moore, points out, this idea may have its roots in the individualistic philosophy of the Greek civilization, which required the doctrine of the immortality of the soul according to which an individual could be rewarded or punished. There is a rich rabbinic parable in the Talmud that explains this:

Antoninus, the emperor of Rome, said to Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, the leader of the Jewish people some 1800 years ago: “The body and soul can exempt themselves from judgment. How is this possible?

The body says, ‘The soul sinned for, from the day that it separated from me, I am like a silent stone in the grave.’

And the soul says, ‘The body is the sinner for, from the day that I separated from it, I fly in the air like a bird.’ ”

And Rabbi Yehudah answered Antoninus,

“I will tell you a parable. What is this like? It is like a mortal king who had a beautiful orchard and there were in it two lovely ripe fruit trees. And he placed two guards to watch the orchard, one a cripple and the other blind.

² Daniel 12:2-3.

³ Quoting from Isaiah chapter 60, verse 21.

Said the cripple to the blind man, "I see beautiful fruits in the orchard. Come and carry me and we will eat them."

The cripple rode on the back of the blind man and they picked the fruits and ate them. After a while, the owner of the orchard came and said to them, "What happened to my lovely fruit?"

The cripple answered, "Do I have legs to go?"

And said the blind man, "Do I have eyes to see?"

What did the owner do? He placed the cripple on the back of the blind man and judged them as one. So, also, the Holy One brings the soul and throws it back into the body and judges them as one."⁴

So we see that neither body nor soul alone can be righteous or sin – only when the two are joined together, can they be judged, rewarded, or punished.

For the rabbis, the idea of resurrection was literally corporeal, meaning that they believed that the body would be returned to the soul, and that it would be able to eat and smell and taste and touch just as it had lived before.

This Talmudic story reminds me of an encounter I had with a Catholic patient who had been taught that the dead would be resurrected whole in body and soul. She was troubled. She recalled seeing a picture of the late Cardinal O'Connor, laid out in his vestments before his funeral. Why, she asked me, if we are resurrected whole and perfect in body and soul, did he need his glasses? This did not make any sense to her.

While the rabbis were certain of the belief in bodily resurrection, I am not. And I also struggle with the fact that the Tanakh – outside of the book of Daniel – did not have this concept.

What do I believe? What do I say? My friend is waiting.

So I turn from the biblical period and from the rabbinic period to medieval Jewish philosophy, to our greatest Jewish philosopher: Maimonides. It was Maimonides, however, who made some of the most controversial statements in the Middle Ages regarding the resurrection of the dead. In his commentary on the Mishnah that I quoted from earlier, he states that

"...the resurrection is one of the foundations of the religion of our teacher Moses. There is no religion and no connection to the Jewish nation for whoever does not believe in it. But, know that humans will definitely die and be separated into that of which they are composed."

This seems to be a self-contradiction because Maimonides claims that humans will be resurrected, but, at the same, he declares that we will not be reunited with our bodies at the end of time.

⁴ From Sanhedrin 91a and b.

As if to further confuse us, Maimonides maintains, in the *Mishneh Torah*, that “in the world to come, there is no body, rather the souls of the righteous alone without a body, like the ministering angels.” You can understand how the readers of Maimonides were confused – in one place he claims that there is a bodily resurrection, while here he informs us that only the soul will live on, without the body.

One of his critics, Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquieres, challenges Maimonides. “How could he say that there is no resurrection for bodies but only for souls, since this is not the opinion of our great rabbis in the Talmud?”

Maimonides, later in his life, wrote another work dealing with the subject of resurrection. It was called, “*Ma’amar Tehiyat Hameitim* -- The Essay on the Resurrection of the Dead.” Maimonides came up with a new concept of resurrection. Influenced by his knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy, Maimonides believed that the soul would live on in a permanent state but the body would not, since it was physical, and physical things could not endure forever. On the other hand, he could not ignore the Talmudic view that insisted that the body would be resurrected. Thus, he unified these two views – the body would be resurrected for a period of time in which the righteous would be restored body and soul, and then there would be a second death, where the body would cease to exist and the soul would go on and live forever. This was Maimonides’ way of reconciling his understanding of philosophy with his understanding of the Talmud and Judaism. ...

Now, this may have worked, for Maimonides, but it is a difficult answer.

And still, I am faced with a woman on her deathbed, not a philosophy course.

So I turn to the modern period. Modern approaches to Judaism often deny resurrection in favor of the seemingly more acceptable doctrine of the immortality of the soul. A century ago, in its Pittsburgh platform, the Reform Movement expressly rejected “as ideas not rooted in Judaism, the beliefs both in bodily resurrection and *gehinnom*, hell.” This idea was reflected in many of the American Reform prayer books, and in the prayer book of the Reconstructionist movement, where the statement affirming resurrection in the Amidah, our central prayer, was simply removed.

On the other hand, the Orthodox movements have maintained the traditional belief in bodily resurrection. The Conservative movement has naturally taken an interesting centrist path, accepting these concepts and not changing the Hebrew of our prayers – we still recite the traditional blessing that God resurrects the dead, but we temper the English to read: “Praised are You, O Lord, who confers immortality upon the departed,” from our *mahzor* or in our regular prayerbook, *Siddur Sim Shalom*: “Praised are You Adonai, Master of life and death.”

...

But how can I explain this to the woman in front of me?

We're now in what's called the "postmodern" period of philosophy. How do postmodernists deal with this age-old question? Neil Gillman, in his book *The Death of Death*, writes extensively about this topic, charting the history from biblical times through rabbinic, medieval, and modern. At the end of his book, he asserts what he, as a postmodern Jew, believes. Recovering and restoring the traditional viewpoints, he asserts that God is God, and there is no reason that God cannot resurrect the dead. Even from his liberal philosophical standpoint, Gillman affirms the need for (as he calls it) "the death of death" and the affirmation of the principle that God can resurrect the dead.

But I'm still left with my own doubts. Often, it makes no sense to me that there is a resurrection of the dead. We are told in the Tanakh that the body returns to dust from whence it came. We are also taught that Judaism emphasizes this world as the most important one. It seems strange that God would go to all the trouble to let our bodies decompose, returning it back to the earth to its most basic particles, simply to recreate them all again. On the other hand, as Rabbi Gillman points out, if God is omnipotent, God can certainly do that. But I'm still torn on this matter.

When I served as hospital chaplain a number of years ago, I worked on a difficult floor, what was called the INN: the Institute for Pediatric Neurosurgery and Neuroscience. The children on that floor suffered from terrible ailments – brain tumors and other deadly diseases of the brain. Once there was an Orthodox two-year old toddler there, named Moshe. Moshe had a terrible brain tumor, which was going to kill him. And I remember meeting his mother there – a traditional Orthodox woman. She was reassured by the belief that in the world to come, Moshe would be treated better; he would be rewarded, and the balance sheet would be evened off for all that he had suffered in this world. I tried to reassure myself with that same belief, but I was not entirely successful. On a logical level, if his soul went on, that would work. But if he were resurrected and given back this body, this body that had tortured him and pained him so, I could not see that as a reward. All I could see was this child, banging his aching head against the side of his crib – bodily resurrection was not reassuring. ...

I searched for different ways to understand resurrection, to make it work for me personally. Through my study of science, I thought about DNA and that perhaps every time a new life is created, and human beings recreate themselves through new life, the DNA is, in essence, resurrecting itself. Each of us has a connection to the first human being because we all bear traces of that original DNA. Perhaps the resurrection of the dead occurs before us every day as new life is born – part of it contains that original DNA – resurrecting generations that came before.

I am comfortable with this – philosophically and logically – but my religious side is not satisfied, for that is not what the rabbis believed, nor is it what my spirit yearns for. Our rabbis maintained that resurrection would occur in our bodies literally, and not simply that we live on in future generations.

Another way to feel comfortable with resurrection is memory. Whenever I close my eyes and imagine to myself my Savta, my grandmother, I can see her, I

can almost hear her, smell her, and touch her. Through memory, perhaps, we resurrect the dead every time we think of them. That works for me on many levels.

But while that is comforting, it doesn't really answer the question that this woman asked me. I still want to give her a helpful and hopeful answer.

So what occurs in the world to come and at the end of days? Is it a world like this world? Or is it an altogether different world? The truth is, we do not know. No one has been to the next world and returned. Those who claim that to have made this journey are met with, at the very least, great skepticism. I would venture to say that all of our traditions about matters beyond death are mainly speculation. No one is certain.

Still, I do feel, somehow, deep deep down within me, that there is a world to come – that the world we know would not make sense without it.

Even though scientists can explain the world from its birth in the big bang explosion to this moment, and through astronomy and physics, we can even see into the future and postulate what will happen, there are still unanswered questions. In college, I was taught that the universe exploded from a “glitch” in the space/time continuum. But what caused that “glitch?” To my understanding, God caused it, or some unknowable force that we have named “God.” Since there is this unknowable force called “God,” because of which all that exists was created, there is more to this world than simply the universe that we can sense. And human beings are unique – we have the ability to appreciate our own existence, to believe in a God, to try to emulate God and live in that way.

I feel deep down that there is another realm to this universe. What is contained in that realm, I don't know. Will there be a bodily resurrection of the dead? I can neither affirm nor deny that. Part of me wants to believe it, wants to know that I'll return to my body because I'm so connected to my body. I cannot imagine a new existence without it. On the other hand, part of me suspects that it is simply a reassuring approach to the world, to save us from the pain and the harsh reality that it may not be so.

But my dying patient awaits me.

Ultimately, I'm pulled back to the psalms, our people's great texts of original prayers and theological speculation. I think about Psalm 27 that we recite during these “*Yamim Noraim*,” during these “days filled with awe.” We recite Psalm 27 to reassure ourselves. It opens with the words:

“*L'David, Adonai uri v'yishi, mimi efnad?* - A Psalm of David, Adonai is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?”

This psalm is uttered during these days of the year because we are afraid – we are acutely aware of our own mortality. We are afraid because we are uncertain, because the future is uncertain, and we recite this psalm to reassure ourselves and give us strength for the coming time, to give us hope.

In the middle of this psalm, we find the verse, “*Ahat sha'alti m'et Adonai otah avakeish* – One thing I have asked of Adonai, One thing I yearn for – to

dwell in the House of Adonai all the days of my life.” Often, I think about that verse. How can I dwell in the house of God? If God is something altogether different from me, how can I dwell in the house of God with my body? Perhaps only my soul will dwell in the house of God?

All the days of my life – the word “all” is unnecessary; but it is there, seemingly hinting that life extends to days beyond our earthly existence. Still, I seek the answer....

I think again of my grandmother – she taught me to recite the final two lines of the *Adon Olam* before going to sleep – a practice I continue with my children. Usually we sing those lines with great gusto, but not always appreciating their theological significance.

The words are: “*B’yado afkid ruhi, b’eit ishan v’a’irah; v’im ruhi givi’ati Adonai li v’lo ira* – Into God’s hand, I place my soul when I sleep and when I wake. And with my soul, my body too, Adonai is mine; I shall not fear.”

While some of the specifics are not clear, that image of God’s hand holding us is quite comforting and reassuring. In the world to come, Adonai will be with us – we, our entire selves, will be reunited with our Creator.

Those words have always consoled me; I offer it to my friend, to the woman before me: I tell her that God is with her. And although I don’t know what will happen at the end of time, I maintain and affirm that God will be holding us.

Kein yehi ratzon. May it be God’s will. Amen.