

YIZKOR YOM KIPPUR 5778 – ON LIFE AFTER DEATH AND MESSIANIC TIMES

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It is no comparison in any way to losing a loved one – but I want to share with you my sense of loss and panic when at 2 o'clock yesterday afternoon I found that my Yizkor sermon had disappeared into the ether!

How I wanted to resurrect it – searching backups and lost files – but to no avail. Eventually I had to accept it was gone, apparently for ever.

Many people believe, and perhaps gain solace from the faith that traditional Judaism believes in life after death, that after we die, we will be reunited with those we have loved, shared our lives with – even our parents, those who themselves gave us life.

But the notion of physical resurrection appears only in one late biblical source, Daniel 12:2, written under Babylonian influence, and whilst in the Babylonian exile.

It seems quite clear that the Rabbis knew that the Bible really has no concept of people coming back to life. When the Talmud records that Rabban Gamliel was asked how he knew God would resurrect the dead he replied: "From the Torah", and he quoted from Deuteronomy 31: for it is written: 'And God said to Moses, Behold you shall sleep with your fathers; and this people will rise up' [:16]. Actually this is a very selective quote, and he can't have believed it – clearly the text means 'Moses, after you die, the Israelites will rise up and go astray after the alien gods in their midst'. If Gamliel really believed that 'this people' referred to 'your ancestors', then it is saying that in the afterlife, the ancestors will go astray after the alien gods! To make the point, he then goes on to find an equally unconvincing quote from the other two sections of Tenach, one from Nevi'im, the prophets and one from Ketuvim, the writings. But I think his point is really the opposite – 'of course you can't find it, because it is not there – the Rabbis didn't believe in physical resurrection, any more than we do today!

Rabbi Meir also had a go. Either he thought he had a better biblical proof text, or he is demonstrating that there really is nothing more. He quotes Exodus 15 – the song of the sea, immediately after the Israelites have crossed the Sea of Reeds, and seen the Egyptians drowned: 'Then Moses and the children of Israel will sing this song unto God' it says [Exodus 15:1]. Meir points out that it does not say 'sang' but 'will sing'; hence the Resurrection can be deduced from the Torah" he says. (Sanhedrin 90b). Really? Is that it? Az yashir Moshe u'vnei Yisrael... 'Then Moses and the Israelites will sing this song', it starts, and immediately continues 'and they said as follows'.... The content of the song is all about God saving them from the sea - it is logical and contextual – nothing whatsoever to do with a future life!

I am convinced that life after death is an idea that the Rabbis deliberately introduced, to resolve the obvious challenge for those simpletons who believed literally in reward and punishment. If good people struggled and suffered in this life, and bad people seemed to flourish and prosper, it could be taken that God really didn't care, or really wasn't there. So they borrowed an Egyptian and Babylonian idea – an afterlife - a life after this one. Those who observed God's laws in this life would be rewarded in the next. Who could argue with that – who would take the risk? Even arguing that there was no life after death could be reason to be barred from entering it! Later Jewish tradition, however, is, not surprisingly,

unclear about exactly who will be resurrected, when it will happen, and what will take place. Perhaps sinners wouldn't get in at all? Or perhaps it was only Jews – or maybe all people?

And how would people get to Jerusalem, where this miraculous resurrection was going to happen. Prominent Jews arranged to be buried in Jerusalem after they'd died. The belief was that the messiah would appear at the only Eastern Gate to Jerusalem, known today as the Golden Gate, on the Mount of Olives, so that was the prime spot to be. So that's where publishing baron Robert Maxwell has been waiting, since he fell of his yacht in 1991, along with the richest of the chosen people, and some rich Christian believers as well. If it happens, Maxwell will have a once in an afterlifetime scoop on his hands! Other people did not wait to die, but undertook the often arduous and dangerous journey to conclude their life in the land even if they had never lived in it – one of these being the medieval Spanish Jewish poet, Judah HaLevi. Legend has it that he prostrated himself on reaching the Jaffa Gate – and was run over by a cart and killed, one assumes slightly earlier than he intended!

For those who could not afford to undertake the journey or have their remains transferred to Jerusalem, the tradition arose of burying bodies facing towards the Holy Land. A midrash from the 9th century taught that God would transport the worthy dead to Israel so they could be resurrected there. In Pesikta Rabbati (1:6) we read: "God will make underground passages for the righteous who, rolling through them...will get to the Land of Israel, and when they get to the Land of Israel, God will restore their breath to them".

It is because of this belief in God bringing the body back to life, that cremation has not been permissible in orthodox practice. It is believed that the body is built on the *luz*, the coccyx, and without that, even God can't bring a person back. This seems bizarre, if God created everything and everyone. It is shocking to think that this orthodox understanding believes that Hitler's victims can never return to a life after death, and the logical conclusion from this is that Hitler, even after his death, is more powerful than God, which is plainly wrong.

You won't be surprised to hear that Progressive Judaism firmly set aside the idea of any physical resurrection. The second prayer of the T'filah, *g'vurot*, starts with the words *Atah gibor l'olam Adonai, m'chayei metim atah, rav l'hoshiah* – literally meaning 'You are mighty forever, O God; You renew life to the dead, O great savior.' Generations of Progressive Jews, including us, were not familiar with these words, as the prayer was changed to read 'Atah gibor l'olam Adonai, m'chayei *hakol* atah, rav l'hoshiah'. Only one word, *metim*, the dead, was changed, to *hakol*, everything. Now it meant 'You are mighty forever, O God; You give life to everything, O great savior.' Indeed that is what we had in *Gates of Prayer*, and we still have almost every time in *Gates of Repentance*. But you'll note that in our Shabbat and Festival prayer book *Mishkan T'filah*, *m'chayei metim* is back, as an option, and we always use it. But it is back because we understand it differently. We have concluded that when our loved ones die, the world is not the same as if they had never lived. They live on in many ways – in our memories, through their children if they had any, and through them to descendants they will never know, who would not have been born if not for them, and through their deeds and influences in the world. We therefore understand *m'chayei metim* as God giving life even to the dead, or life beyond death, and thus translate it as *Eternal life*. In the new *machzor* which we hope to have by next High Holydays, this is the way we will be using it, though, since Progressive Judaism encourages educated choice, those who are more comfortable with *M'chayei hakol* – God giving life to everything, may continue to use that formulation, which will also be in the book.

What we tend to believe, though, is that the soul is in some mysterious sense eternal. We say that, when the body is laid to rest, the soul returns to the shelter of God's wing, where it finds eternal rest and peace. Personally, I find this image consoling. That's what I will want!

As this long day, and the ten days of penitence, draws to a close, we are supposed to knock in the first peg of the sukkah before we even break our fast. This makes a very tangible connection between these powerful days of reflection and the festive harvest days of Sukkot which start in just five days, on Wednesday evening. And, though it is a festival with a very different tone, with the shaking of lulav and sniffing of Etrog, with sitting in the hut, it also has a clear connection of theme. The shaky structure reminds us again of our human frailty, of our dependence on God's protection, just as we are reminded in this Yizkor service and over this ten days. And there is another, less obvious connection also – the scroll connected to Sukkot is Ecclesiastes, which contains the words: a time to reap, a time to sow, a time to be born, a time to die. Life is cyclical, and finite. Here we are again, another New Year, another Yom Kippur, another Yizkor. Yet, if we are exactly the same as last year, we have failed the challenge. In truth we cannot be – we are all another year older, hopefully another year wiser, certainly another year more experienced at living. Most of all, we should be at least a little bit nicer, kinder, better, if we managed anything at all in this year.

Ecclesiastes also says that the soul of the wise dwells in the house of mourning, whilst the soul of the fool dwells in the house of pleasure. Those who live shallow, self-centred, instant-gratification lives, may never feel life's deep intensities, shades and colours, or sense their inner humanity. But, as philosopher Daniel Klein tells us, there have been times when he has suffered a terrible personal loss, and grieved intensely. At the bottom of his depths of feeling, he discovered some sense of enlightenment – that he was finally facing a fundamental fact of life. Everything is transient. Loss is inevitable. That is just the way it is. Most of the time we try to ignore this immutable fact, but finally facing it bears the sweetness of embracing Truth. And embracing that Truth, painful as it is, can make us feel more authentically alive. Life's losses are awful – yet somehow we have to accept them and carry on. As Heschel says: In reverence, suffering and humility, we discover our existence and find the bridge that leads from (simple) existence to God.

But why would we choose the second way. that sounds harder, more challenging, more painful? Because we believe that God has charged us to make the world better, not just to look after ourselves. Our tradition has long had a belief in a human saviour, a Messiah, descended from King David. And over the years, and especially at times of oppression and desperation, many saviours have arisen who have turned out to be *false* messiahs. The most famous is Bar Kochba, who we read about on Pesach – even Rabbi Akiva thought he was the chosen one! Aside of course from a certain Yeshua, preacher and healer in the Galilee whose followers still believe he is. But our test of the Messiah is the arrival of the messianic age, a time of peace and perfection. We haven't got there yet! Though Progressive Jews profoundly believe in the messianic times, we have moved away from the individual messiah. For one thing, it is too limited for our egalitarian vision, having to be descended from David, Jewish, male... More importantly, waiting for someone else to sort the world out takes the onus off each of us. Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, cleverly addressed this by saying every one of us has the potential to be the messiah.

Anyway, aside from Havdalah, where we have kept the words 'Im Mashiach ben David' to fit the tune, our siddur and machzor have removed all messiah references. But the new books,

using the weak excuse of metaphor, have brought it back, and some of my colleagues don't agree with me, see no problem and wish to keep it, so, apart from indenting it so we can skip it, look out for it next year – mechaye metim has happened on Mashiach ben David!

Our new machzor is, however, full of wonderful prayers and consoling readings, and a moving new Yizkor service. We pray that we will all be together in a year's time to use it.

So as we share together our sadness and anguish, remembering our loved ones, may our memories strengthen our resolve to return to the work of building a better world. Amen