DEATH, RESURRECTION, AND IMMORTALITY IN JUDAISM

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Haverim

Last month our Christian neighbors celebrated the death and bodily resurrection of Jesus. So what better time to discuss how death, immortality, and resurrection are treated in Judaism.

First, let's take a quick quiz. I'm going to give one multiple choice question. How many of you believe that the concept of bodily resurrection was first introduced by:

1. Christianity

2. Judaism

3. Some other religion?

One thing is clear. if you chose Christianity, you lose. Many commentators believe that the Zoroastrians introduced the concept, but it is possible that it began with Judaism.

Bodily resurrection first appeared in Jewish literature long before the birth of Jesus. In Daniel chapter 12 (165 BCE) we read: "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 book of Daniel concludes: "But you, go on to the end. You shall rest, and arise to your destiny at the end of the days

In Isaiah chapter 25 (circa 500 BCE) we read: "(God) will destroy death forever" and in chapter 26 we find: "Oh let your dead revive! Let corpses arise. Awake and shout for joy you who dwell in the dust."

And note other second century BCE writings which were not incorporated into the Jewish biblical canon:

In Enoch chapter 92 "The righteous one shall awaken from his sleep. He shall arise and walk in the ways of righteousness."

And how about II Maccabees verse 7 where during the martyrdom of Hannah and her seven sons we read : "You, you fiend are making us depart from present life, but the King of the universe will resurrect us, who die for the sake of his laws, to a new eternal life."

Two other famous events regarding the dead, but not bodily resurrection, can also be found in the Prophets. In Ezekiel Chapter 37 is the famous allegory of the dry bones. Although some interpret Ezekiel's dramatic vision as bodily resurrection most view it as a metaphor for Israel's national regeneration.

Another example is the confrontation of Saul, the woman (or witch) of En Dor and the ghost of Samuel. (I Samuel V.28) The witch sees the ghost of Samuel though Saul does not, and Saul hears Samuel's voice though she does not. But there is no indication of permanent bodily resurrection of Samuel. Indeed, Samuel is angry that he has been disturbed and quickly returns to Sheol.

Other Jewish writings during the first centuries BCE and CE focused on the platonic idea of the death of the body and the indestructibility of the soul.

The Wisdom of Solomon, written by a Hellenized Jew included in verse 3: "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be an affliction. But they are at peace. For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality." (New Oxford Annotated Bible p. 60AP)

During the time of Jesus the Jewish community was split into three basic groups --Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes. Each had strong views on death, immortality, and resurrection.

The Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife, the immortality of souls, or bodily resurrection because these subjects were not addressed in the Five Books of Moses.

The Essenes were strictly platonic believing that bodies are corruptible and impermanent, whereas souls are immortal.

The Pharisees certainly believed in the immortality of the soul, but they also adopted the idea of bodily resurrection. Note Josephus' description of the Pharisees:

"Their belief is that souls have a deathless vigor, and beneath the earth there are rewards and punishments according as they have been devoted in life to virtue or vice. For the latter everlasting imprisonment is prescribed, But the former shall have the power to revive and live again."

Jesus was a practicing Pharisee and not surprisingly the Gospels went to great lengths to reinforce the Pharisee's views on resurrection.

Thus Paul states in Acts chapter 23 "I (Jesus) am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees, I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead."

So, we find that many Jews before Jesus,--and certainly during Jesus' lifetime-- espoused resurrection--but also that resurrection was hotly debated within the Jewish community. The surprising fact is that rabbinic Judaism emerged from this debate and canonized resurrection in a prayer that is familiar to all of us.

Sometime during the late first century BCE or early first century CE the Amidah entered the liturgy. In the Gevurot section we find these powerful words:

Atah gibor l'olom adonai machaiyai matim atah rav lehosheeah. Mechalkail chayim bechesed machaiyai matim berachamim rabim. skipping to: Baruch atah adonai machaiyai hamatim.

Three times we encounter the words machaiyai matim or machaiyai hamatim. How are they translated?

My grandfather's machzor published in Vienna in 1890 says:"who reviveth the dead." The 1914 Phillips siddur translates "who quickenest the dead" as does the 1915 Singer siddur.

The 1946 Silverman siddur contains "who callest the dead to life everlasting". The 1960 de Sola Pool siddur prefers "who revives the dead," the Art Scroll states "who resuscitates the dead" and the Metsudah Siddur says “Resurrector of the dead”.

Why did the rabbis include these words in one of the most important prayers in our liturgy? The great scholar Louis Finkelstein believed that it was a political statement to ensure that whomever led the community in prayer would be a Pharisee.

In the interests of time, let's fast forward past the Middle Ages and the debates and writings on immortality by Maimonides and his philosophical colleagues, although we should take note of Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles of Faith. The 13th says:

I believe by complete faith that there will be a resurrection of the dead at the time that will be pleasing before the Creator, blessed be His name, and the remembrance of Him will be exalted forever and for all eternity.

Similarly, I'd like to pass over the very interesting but difficult ideas of the mystics and focus on the viewpoints of Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative Judaism.

Reform Judaism rejected the concept of bodily resurrection in its 1885 Pittsburgh Platform:

"We assert the doctrine of Judaism-- that the soul of man is immortal-- grounding the belief on the divine nature of the human

spirit-- which forever finds bliss in righteousness and misery in wickedness. We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism the belief both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden (hell and paradise) as abodes for everlasting punishment or reward."

Reform (and Reconstructionist) Judaism went further and changed the Hebrew in the Gevurot section of the Amidah to read mechaiyai ha kol (translated as source of life or creator of life) instead of mechaiyai ha matim.

In its latest edition of the siddur, however, Reform Judaism included mechaiyai ha matim as a prayer option .

Orthodox Judaism continues to believe in bodily resurrection. In the Art Scroll edition of the Siddur which as noted above uses the verb resuscitate, the commentary notes three kinds of resuscitation: "man's awakening every morning after deathlike slumber; the rain that has the life sustaining quality of making vegetation grow; and the literal resuscitation of the dead that will take place in the messianic age."

Conservative Judaism (not surprisingly) has several points of view ranging from "who confers immortality upon the departed" to the more traditional "gives life to the dead" found in our Lev Shalem.

Finally, we should take note of the special Kaddish used at the traditional Jewish burial service:

"May God's great name be exalted and sanctified in the world which will be renewed and where God will revive the dead and raise them to eternal life…"

Well-- where do I stand on all of these issues?. The answer requires a brief look at my personal theology. I define religion as the irrational (and I emphasize the word irrational) response of mankind to two fundamental unknowns -- creation and death.

Yes, I acknowledge that religion can play many other important roles in our lives

* as a motivator and guide for those who wish to lead a better life,

* as a mechanism for harnessing the resources of the community in times of joy and sorrow

* as a spiritual tonic through inner communion with the Divine

* and through ritual --as an ongoing link to prior generations

Many other disciplines and institutions exist to deal with the above issues including psychology,philosophy. sociology, psychiatry, hobbies, and clubs.

But most religions have a unique mission—to answer the questions: where did I come from? And where am I going?

My answer to these questions requires a belief in God.

I believe in an all powerful G-d who creates and redeems.(In between we are on our own). And if an all powerful G-d can create and redeem, surely this G-d can conquer death thereby preserving both body and soul. Thus I feel quite comfortable with a traditional translation of machaiyai hamatim --"Who resurrects the dead."

And therefore I believe that some day I and my friends and family, together with the righteous of all nations, will sit at that great picnic table in the sky where--- as our rabbis have said --- we will feast on the giant fish leviathan throughout eternity.

Shabbat shalom

Note: Most of the quotes can be found in the late Neil Gillman's The Death of Death (1997). I could not have developed my thinking much less prepared this sermon without Gillman's insights and scholarship.