Resurrection as a Core Tenet of Judaism

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Our *parashah*, Ha'azinu, has the verse in the Pentateuch that is closest to articulating the idea of resurrection.[1] This offers us an opportunity to discuss this extraordinary idea.

Resurrection of the dead is a central tenet of Christianity, while among modern Jews, the idea is relatively neglected. As a result, many people today assume that this is a Christian belief. The truth is almost the reverse. Resurrection of the dead is one of the central teachings of Rabbinic Judaism, even to the point of putting the idea in the Amidah, the central prayer in Judaism. The Rabbis put the blessing for resurrection as the **second** blessing of the Eighteen.[2] They taught that universal resurrection will take place. All the past dead will come to life in the Messianic era. The awakening of the dead will be the sign that the Messiah has arrived and the final perfection is at hand. This idea was so firmly inculcated that, after Jesus' crucifixion by the Romans, the early Jewish Christians interpreted their continuing experience of Jesus' presence among them as fulfilling the promise of resurrection. To them, this was

[1] See discussion below.

[2] Another name for the Amidah is the Shemoneh Esrei, meaning eighteen. Originally, there were eighteen blessings in the daily Amidah. However, a nineteenth was later added in talmudic Babylonia.

decisive proof that he was the Messiah. They assumed that the revival of all the human dead would soon follow, and the whole world would be transformed and perfected in that generation. In placing resurrection at the heart of their emerging religion, Christians also took over the Jewish teaching of the final triumph of life and made it a central part of the new faith, Christianity.[3]

Resurrection is a bit of a latecomer to Jewish faith. Indeed, the Sadducees, the major Jewish religious group opposing the Pharisees, insisted that this theological idea was not found in the true Torah (the Five Books of Moses). They accused the Pharisees of grafting this idea into Judaism. Some contemporary critical scholars insist that the idea comes from contemporary Persian-Zoroastrian sources.

The Rabbis doubled down on resurrection, making it a central tenet. Not only did they insist that anyone who denied resurrection would lose their share in the world-to-come, they added that anyone who denied this teaching **was from the Torah itself** would also forfeit their share.[4] The irony is that the only two crystal clear references to resurrection of the dead are found in the Prophets and the Writings, in the books of Isaiah and Daniel.[5] However, our *parashah* has a verse which can be interpreted as a reference to resurrection. The verse reads: "See now, I—even I—am He (the one and only Lord); there is no other Lord alongside Me. **I put to death** and **I make alive**, I wound and I heal. Nor is there any [Power] that can deliver out of my hand" (Deuteronomy 32:39). This verse can be interpreted as poetic celebration of

[3] In my book, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity* (Jewish Publication Society, 2004), I argue that the separation and creation of Christianity alongside Judaism was the will of God, for thereby the covenant of *tikkun olam* was opened up to non-Jews without diluting the Jewish character or substance of Judaism.
[4] See Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 90a and ff.
[5] Isaiah 26:19: "The dead men of your people shall live; my dead body shall arise." Daniel 12:2: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awaken."

God's might—that is, God brings death but God also creates life, i.e. these are two parallel and awesome divine activities. Or, the verse can be interpreted as follows. Just as in "I wound and I heal (the wounded one)" the Divine action is done on one and the same person, so too the literarily parallel structure "I put to death, and I make alive" also applies to one and the same person. This, then, is a reference to resurrection.[6]

Why did the Rabbis insist on resurrection as a core belief? This reflects the general thesis I have argued in past Divrei Torah, that Judaism's ultimate goal is to overcome death. In Isaiah's words: "Death will be swallowed up in eternity…" (25:8). In the Messianic age, all the enemies of life will be vanquished—poverty, hunger, oppression, war, and sickness will be overcome. Therefore, life will win out totally and there will be no more death. The Rabbis take this doctrine one step further to make clear that the triumph of life will be total. Not only will there be no further death, but every death that happened will be nullified and overcome by the resurrection of the dead.

The Rabbis sensed the difficulty of affirming such a total reversal of Nature. Therefore, in the blessing for resurrection, they listed all God's intermediate redemptive actions that point to the ultimate possibility. "You [God] sustain all life with loving kindness, so you will revive the dead in your great compassion. You lift up the falling, you heal the sick, you free the imprisoned—so you will keep faith with those who sleep in the dust."[7]

The Rabbis also put the prayer for rain into this blessing. This is to awaken in us the recognition that resurrection occurs before our eyes. Every spring, after the winter in which

[6] See the discussion of the Talmud on Sanhedrin 90a.
[7] I am indebted for this insight to Rabbi Professor Reuven Kimelman of Brandeis University.

much vegetation dies and the desert is barren, the rains come. Overnight, God brings a resurrection of nature in which the landscape springs to life with a carpet of green. We are called to project these miraculous displays of divine might one quantum leap further into the resurrection of the dead.

Why was it so important for the Rabbis to uphold resurrection of the body? They taught that death was not the final word. They taught the immortality of the soul and that there was a world-to-come in which the human soul returned to God and lived in eternity. However, they also wanted to teach that the human is not pure spirit. The body—the flawed, sweaty, physically imperfect, and constantly decaying body—is equally important and is an inseparable part of a human being. Therefore, they did not want to privilege the soul as being exclusively immortal. Furthermore, the person existing as soul in the afterlife is not the flesh-and-blood person that I know, loved, and bound my life with theirs. Hence, they insisted that this embodied person will be restored when the world is fully repaired. Anyone who has loved and lost someone will recognize this truth, that I loved the whole person—body and soul. Nothing can console for or replace the lost loved one but that person in all their embodied self.

Through this teaching, the Rabbis also communicated that this fleeting mortal life is the true condition of full existence. This is the life we are called to live fully and experience in depth, and ennoble with higher purpose and by doing good. Resurrection implies that this world is the acme of our being. The holy life consists of living and acting and savoring this worldly existence. For all the ideals and promises of the world-to-come, it is a “secondary” existence. In the words of Rabbi Jacob: “Better one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than all the life in the world-to-come…” (Mishnah Avot 4:22).

With the advent of modern culture, materialist thought became dominant. Modern Jews became very uncomfortable with the idea of resurrection. The concept of death seemed final and irreversible. The kind of miracle it would take to overcome death seemed old-fashioned and impossible to affirm for a scientifically-trained person. Jon Levenson, in his outstanding book *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, has ironically described how the denominations distanced from this teaching.[8] The Reform and Reconstructionist streams changed the blessing from *me<u>h</u>ayyei ha-metim* (Who resurrects the dead) to *me<u>h</u>ayyei et ha-kol* (Who gives life to all). The official Conservative prayerbook translated the words in the second blessing "*me<u>h</u>ayyei metim attah*" as "Thou callest the dead to immortal life." As befits a traditional movement, it kept the closing words of the blessing *me<u>h</u>ayyei ha-metim*, but translated the words into English as "calls the dead to life everlasting."[9]

I add to Levenson's irony that the Orthodox kept the words in Hebrew and English but neutralized them by saying them so routinely that they ended up paying no attention to them.[10] The best proof I can give for this statement is that, in almost 20 years in yeshiva study, I never heard a *shiur* or extended teaching of this idea. The first time I heard an Orthodox Rabbi give a sermon on this theme was when I was 41 years old—and that rabbi was me! I awakened to this theme in struggling with the Holocaust and its religious implications. The immortality of the soul of the victims offered little consolation for the terrible loss and tragedy of the Shoah. It dawned upon me that only full restoration of the victims—bodies and souls together—could heal the void and pain of this catastrophe.

[8] Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: the Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (Yale University Press, 2006).
[9] *Seder Tefillot Yisrael: Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* (1946), p. 96.
[10] It is striking that the Haredi Artscroll siddur translated this blessing as "who resuscitates the dead"—apparently avoiding the word resurrects because it smacked of being Christian.

Later, when my wife and I suffered the devastating personal loss of a son, I experienced the deep human need and the absolute moral justness of resurrection. I also came to understand that, underlying the concept of resurrection, is the teaching that God loves us in all our limitations, with all our human needs and weaknesses. The depth of life—in peak moments that end too swiftly, in profound connections and relationships that surge and ebb, in joy that comes and goes—is the most precious expression of being. In a state of final perfection, this actual being would be restored. This is the meaning of resurrection.

In recent decades, as Jewry has increasingly broken the tyranny of modern categories, Jewish theologians have cast off the dominant materialism and opened up to the idea of resurrection.[11] Part of the reason is that postmodernism allows us to hold contradictory truths—including material natural existence and spiritual existence—in tandem. Another part is the serious advancements in extending life, such as in stem cell regeneration, and in discovering the mechanisms and limits of regular cell regeneration. Since DNA, the code of life, has been decoded and the human genome sequenced, the imagination of Jurassic Park of resurrected dinosaurs—or other mammals and humans—is no longer as fanciful as it once appeared. To be clear, I am not trying to argue for resurrection on scientific grounds. To my readers who find resurrection too drastic a clash with physical laws of nature, I urge you to adopt it as a metaphor. The Jewish goal is total triumph of life. Work through the covenantal framework, step by step, to increase life, cure illness, prevent death. Then, we see how far we can go.

To my readers who can free themselves from the iron laws of science in modernity, let yourself open up and be carried away by the visionary, audacious, superhuman (better:

[11] See e.g. Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death* (Jewish Lights, 2000).

human-divine partnership) mission of enabling life to be fully realized, and win out over all its enemies and past defeats.[12]

[12] I argue this case at greater length in the book *The Triumph of Life* (forthcoming).