

# Living with the Dead – On the Resurrection of the Dead

*Yizkor 5779 (2018)*

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For the past year, I have been praying with the dead.

Just a month ago, I marked exactly a year since my maternal grandfather passed away. For eleven months, morning and night I recited kaddish in his memory. During this same time period, a beloved parent of one of our members also passed away. As the mourner could not attend services regularly, I took on reciting kaddish for their parent as well. In addition, during this past year, the mother of one of my childhood best friends passed away. This friend also reached out to me, asking me to help carry the load of reciting kaddish on a daily basis for his mother.

In this way, I found myself praying each morning and each night with the presence of these three souls. On the one hand, I was part of the daily minyan, the vibrant community of individuals who join together thrice daily for prayers. On the other hand, and in a deeper sense, I prayed with the dead as well.

My grandfather was the one who first introduced me to prayer so his presence during these services was not surprising. Often times, I would hear his voice and I would try to heed his advice. “Don’t rush in prayer.” “Saying less with greater intention is more worthwhile.” At other times, I would feel him binding my Tefilin straps and flipping through the pages of my prayer book.

During kaddish I would also focus my thoughts on the other people for whom I was reciting kaddish.

I had vivid memories of our congregant’s parent attending her wedding. Her joy at the ceremony would return to me as I made my way through kaddish and would nourish and sustain my mornings.

Memories would also suddenly rush through me of my friend’s mother who was a parental presence in my childhood. Her wit and somewhat biting humor would sometimes come to me as I would recite kaddish for her. “Why are you saying kaddish for me,” she would say, “I am right here with you.”

As I became increasingly aware of their presence, I also became more attuned to the second blessing we recite thrice daily in the Amidah prayer service. This blessing praises God’s powers and abilities to revive the dead.

*“Atah gibor le’olam Adonay, mechayeh metim atah rav le’hoshiaah”* – “You are eternally mighty, Lord. You give life to the dead and have great power to save.”

*“Mechayeh metim be’rachamim rabim”* – “God revives the dead with great compassion.”

The prayer continues by poetically alluding to this theme once again noting that “God keeps His faith with those who sleep in the dust.”

The blessing finally then returns more explicitly to this belief towards its conclusion claiming that God is “faithful in reviving the dead” (“*Ve’neeman attah le’hachyot metim*”) and ultimately concludes with the statement “*Baruch attah Hashem, mechayeh ha’metim*” – “Blessed are You, Lord, who revives the dead.”

By setting this theme so centrally into our liturgy, the rabbis made it clear that resurrection of the dead is an essential Jewish belief. Three times a day we are given the opportunity to reflect upon this belief and affirm our faith in it.

Not surprisingly, Maimonides listed resurrection of the dead as the final one among his compiled list of thirteen principles of Jewish faith. Maimonides’ list indicates that God’s revival of the dead is the definitive and final act in the world’s ultimate redemption.

Maimonides’ principle states:

אני מאמין באמונה שלמה, שתהיה תחית המתים בעת שיעלה רצון מאת הבורא ...  
“I believe with complete faith that there will be a Resurrection of the Dead, at the time when the Creator, may He be blessed, wills it to happen ...”

In his treatise on this topic, Maimonides also notes that the rabbis’ inclusion of the theme of resurrection in our daily services is indicative of its centrality. At the same time, Maimonides also wrote elsewhere that matters concerning the world-to-come, resurrection of the dead, and the messianic age are not really known to us.

“Concerning these things,” Maimonides noted, “no one knows how they will come to pass until they actually occur. For the prophets record them only as veiled allusions, and the only traditions our sages have are those that come from Scripture, so opinion is divided.”

I believe with a firm faith that resurrection of the dead is not only alluded to in our sacred texts, but that life itself, from time to time, points us in the direction of this belief. Each of us have had experiences in which life triumphs over death, in which the dead, as it were, return to life.

Let us consider a number of social, ethical, and spiritual teachings that the rabbis derived from this powerful concept.

In the Talmud the rabbis taught:

הרואה את חבירו ... לאחר שנים עשר חודש מברך ברוך מחיה המתים" (ברכות נח, ב)  
“Whoever encounters their fellow after not seeing the person for over twelve months recites *Blessed is the One who revives the dead.*” (BT Berachot 58b)

In a pre-technological world, a world deprived of mail or email, telephones and social media, the experience of reencountering a person after such a prolonged period of time was akin to the revival of the dead. Simply put, in those days, departing from a place for over one year, without further contact, must have felt like departing from the world.

In our day, it’s possible for us to delve into this teaching in a slightly different way.

A dear childhood friend of mine struggled for years with the direction of his life. For close to a decade, he was a mere shadow of himself. Recently, however, after years of therapy and close support from family and friends, he seems to have found his footing once again. Though I have stayed in constant contact with this friend over the years, the experience of seeing him recently, with what seems like a renewed lease on life, felt like a resurrection to me. My old friend was back.

In a similar vein, another close friend recently described a good conversation she had with her mother that, after years of tension and miscommunication, helped at least for a moment and perhaps for a longer time still, to reset the relationship. She described the exchange as a moment of resurrection. Suddenly she had a mother again and feelings of love that were buried deep in her heart suddenly burst back into life.

Sometimes, something within us is dead. Sometimes, something in our relationship with others has died. When our hearts become fossilized and we feel like we're buried deep in the ground, our belief in the resurrection of the dead, serves to remind us that hope is never lost and that we still have the capacity to rise from the dust.

The rabbis also teach us that we can suffer a spiritual or moral death:

"רשעים קרויים מתים בחייהם" (בראשית רבה, לט, ז)

"The wicked are called dead even while alive." (Midrash Genesis Rabbah, 39:7)

Sadly, we all know that repeating a misdeed deadens our minds, hardens our hearts, and petrifies our souls. It is so hard to commit a sin for the very first time and yet so easy to return to that sin, over and over again, after that very first breach. This is true both spiritually and morally.

Every time we neglect one of the mitzvot, something in us dies. And every time we commit a moral offence, something in us perishes as well. In time, our minds become dull, our hearts become apathetic, and a living spirit departs from our souls.

Even with that, we all know individuals who are exemplars of Teshuvah, of true repentance. Men and women, young and old, who have been able to drastically redirect the course of their life through concrete actions and deeds. The rabbis have strongly cautioned us from ever reminding a Baal Teshuva, a penitent, of their past. As far as the penitent and we are concerned, that past is dead and the person standing before us now has forcefully claimed a new lease on his or her spiritual and moral life. In this way, Teshuvah is a form of resurrection, a rising from the dust of sin and the burial ground of spiritual disconnection.

Belief in resurrection of the dead therefore challenges us to breathe new life into our spiritual and moral organs as we seek to return to an upright life.

There is yet a third form of resurrection of the dead, one that is not only familiar to us from the sources, but thankfully, it is a resurrection known to us from our people's recent history.

The prophet Ezekiel boldly declares:

"הִנֵּה אֲנִי פֹתֵחַ אֶת קְבֻרֹתֵיכֶם וְהֵעֲלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם מִקְבְּרֹתֵיכֶם עִמִּי... וְנָתַתִּי רוּחִי בְכֶם וְחִייתֶם, וְהִנַּחֲתִי אֶתְכֶם עַל-אֲדָמַתְכֶם" (יחזקאל לז, יב-יד).

12...So says the Lord God: Lo! I open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves as My people, and bring you home to the land of Israel.

13 Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and lead you up out of your graves as My people.

14 And I will put My spirit into you, and you shall live, and I will set you on your land, and you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and have performed it," says the Lord. (Ezekiel 37:12-14)

Many of us in this sanctuary are descendants of Shoah survivors. All of us here are beneficiaries of our people's return to the land of Israel and the revival of our people as a political entity, along with the revival of Hebrew language and culture. Stories upon stories relate how Jews arriving from the four corners of the world recited the words "*Baruch Mechayeh Hametim*" – "Blessed is the One who revives the dead" upon reaching the shores of Israel.

In our generation, Ezekiel's words no longer call for the sort of leap of faith that was once demanded of our ancestors living only a few generations ago. Unlike them, we have actually witnessed the rising of the people Israel from the deathbed, from the ground, and from the ashes. We, unlike our ancestors, have seen the triumph of life over death.

At the same time, we are certainly not immune to moments of deep despair. Indeed, from time to time ongoing developments in Israel, the Middle East, and the world could shake the foundations of our hope and faith, regardless of where we fall on the political spectrum. I am often surprised by voices of hopelessness coming from both the left and the right. The left too easily offers visions of doom and gloom, while voices from the right too readily accept the status quo, as though Israel once established, cannot but remain as it is. And yet, the mere establishment of the State of Israel and the resurrection of the Jewish people teach us the exact opposite lesson. To be a Zionist in its deepest sense means that we never accept the status quo, that we garner the courage to challenge things as they are, and that we dare dream of a different tomorrow. Indeed, while Israel has risen from the ashes, the dream of Israel has not yet reached the fullness of life.

In this vein, on a national level resurrection of the dead means that as a people, Israel must continue to defeat hopelessness and despair through the ongoing triumph of potential and creativity over facts and reality; the triumph of life over death.

At this point, I must share that the belief in the resurrection of the dead was also instrumental in my decision to serve as our community's rabbi for the next ten years.

More than six months ago, I deeply struggled with making this major professional and personal commitment. For one, I very much wrestled with the realization that for the time being, I will need to shelve my dream of joining our brothers and sisters in Israel. In addition, I really wanted to ensure that I had a good reason, or better yet, a binding reason, to remain as a rabbi in the diaspora and in this shul.

At about this very same time, I attended our community's Yom Hashoah commemoration where I became much more aware of the life and critical work of Emanuel Ringelblum. Many of

you know that Frayda and I ultimately named our son Emanuel this past summer in memory of Ringleblum.

During the war, Emanuel Ringelblum and his family were resettled to the Warsaw Ghetto. There he led a secret operation code-named Oyneg Shabbos. The activities of the group were kept so secretive that not even the inhabitants of the ghetto were aware of the operation. He spent his days collecting information, and wrote notes at night. Together with numerous other Jewish writers, scientists, rabbis, and ordinary people, Ringelblum collected diaries, documents, commissioned papers, and preserved the posters and decrees that comprised the memory of the doomed community.

Ringelblum's heroic focus on the totality of life in Warsaw struck a deep chord for me. At history's darkest hour, Emanuel Ringelblum dared to ask, who will tell our story, who will remember our past.

At the conclusion of the commemoration that evening, I mentioned to a few of our shul's members that from now on I must keep a photo of Emanuel Ringelblum in my office. His story has brought a renewed sense of mission to my own work and provided the necessary reason for me to carry on as our community's rabbi.

At our son's Brit Milah, we shared the following words: "The legacy of the Shoah must always be one of life over death, of not only remembrance but also of resurrection. By honoring the legacy of Emanuel Ringelblum and that of Jewish Warsaw we are also bequeathing our son, and all of our children, this sacred mission – to not only remember, but also to resurrect, and to not only resurrect, but to also always bring forth new life."

Emanuel Ringelblum provided us with a vivid description of the life that was ultimately lost in Warsaw and Europe. His work however cannot be solely anchored in the past, but must also become a guidepost for what could still be. We, *le'havdil*, who are blessed with life, must honor this work with the way we lead our lives.

On a communal level therefore, the belief in the resurrection of the dead, challenges each and every one of us, to do all that we can to enhance the flourishing of Jewish life, in its broadest sense, in our own community and all over the world.

Let me put it in very direct terms. If the efforts we're making in supporting Jewish life in Berkeley and the East Bay, and in ensuring Jewish continuity in the diaspora, don't feel like the sort of heroic efforts needed for the resuscitation of the dead, then quite frankly, we're probably just not doing enough.

I'm staying here with you because I believe that together we can revive the dead. That, and nothing short of it, ought to be our mission for the coming years.

In conclusion, allow me to share one more personal reflection.

In the beginning of August, our family flew to Montreal in order to introduce our newest born son to his great grandmother, my spouse Frayda's grandmother, who, please God, will be turning 100 years old later this year.

On the eve of Shabbat, we reminded Frayda's grandmother that our son's middle name, Leib, was given to him in memory of her own grandfather. Her eyes welled up in tears and all she could say was "Of my entire family, I remained the sole survivor after the Shoah."

At that very moment, my eyes rested on my four children, all dressed and ready for Shabbat. Our firstborn was named for his maternal great grandfather, our second born was named for his paternal great great-grandfather, our third born was named for her paternal great grandfather, and our last one was named for his maternal great-great great-grandfather (six generations back!). Seeing my children together in this way, so full of life, immersed in the sanctity of Shabbat, I could not help but feel the presence of their ancestors in the room. Hirsh taking care of Mendel. Mendel being playful with Meir. And Meir showing love and affection for Leib. The dead have returned to life and life has triumphed over death.

The prophet Isaiah boldly speaks of the resurrection of the dead:

"בִּלְעַד הַמּוֹת לְנֶצַח וּמָחָה ה' אֶל־לֵהִים דְּמָעָה מֵעַל כָּל פְּנִים" (ישעיה, כה, ח).

Isaiah speaks of a time to come in which "[God] will conceal death forever, and the Lord God shall wipe the tears off every face..." (Isaiah 25:8)

As we enter the Yizkor service, teary eyed with mournful hearts, let us take comfort in this belief and let us be guided by this faith.

May the dead return to life through our actions and deeds and may the Lord God wipe away all of our tears.