

“Memories Are Not Enough: Judaism & the Afterlife”

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Yom Kippur Yizkor Sermon, 5774

Mr. Goldberg was truly on his death bed. It wouldn't be long now before he passed away and as he lay there, his wife said to him, “My darling, is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable? Anything at all that would give you some pleasure right now?” Mr. Goldberg thought about it for a moment and said, “You know, I just love that chocolate babka you make. If I could have just one small slice of that babka it would make me so happy, it would be like heaven.” To which Mrs. Goldberg replied, “Really dear, the chocolate babka? I was saving that for the shiva!”

For Mr. Goldberg, heaven would be an eternity of his wife's decadent chocolate babka. Sadly for him, that didn't seem to be in the cards. As we prepare to recite Yizkor, Judaism's sacred prayer of memory for those we have lost, I want you to think about this question: “What do you believe about the afterlife? What happens to us after we die?” Is there existence beyond the grave, or are we finished, kaput, done for after we take our last breath? My guess is that there may be a wide range of answers to that question...in fact for many of you the answer may be “nothing.” Nothing happens to us after we die. While 83% of American Jews claim a belief in God, only 38% say they believe in something called “heaven,” and 22% believe in something called “hell.”¹ I remember being preoccupied by this question as far back as childhood. I remember asking my grandmother, whom many of you have met, and is here with us this morning, what would happen to her after she died...may she live until 120! I was very young, and she was and is very precious to me. The thought of not being able to see her was difficult for my young mind to accept. I remember what she told me: She said that even after she died, she would continue to live in my heart and in my memories of her forever. That answer comforted me as a child, but the more I have thought about it over the years, the less satisfied I have become. And this implies no disrespect, Grandma...In fact, what is unsatisfying about it is that it's not a sufficient enough afterlife for the people I love—for people like you, because the implication is that my ancestors will continue to live on only as long as there is someone alive who remembers them, their deeds, their values. Woody Allen had a great line about this. He

¹ Religion & Public Life Project, PewResearch, “Religious Landscape Survey,” 2001

said: “I don’t want to be immortal through my work, I want to be immortal **by not dying.**” You see the problem is that after a few generations, there won’t be anyone alive who directly knew that person who died, and a few generations after that there may not even be any living person who could pass on a single story, a single anecdote, or for that matter, even recognize that ancestor if they walked in the room. So the afterlife seemed extremely limited only to as many generations as could remember you. Furthermore, this construct is deeply problematic to me for another reason: Very often the worst human beings are remembered for the longest amount time. It turns my stomach to say this, but I do not know what my great-great grandparents looked like beyond some fuzzy, grainy, black and white picture in a shoe box somewhere. But I know exactly what Adolf Hitler looked like. I know all kinds of details about his life, his writings, his speeches, his personal life...none of which I know about my own relatives just 3 or 4 generations back. So Hitler’s afterlife is longer than my great-great grandparents’ precisely because of his enormously evil legacy? That doesn’t seem right or just or fair to me...

Unfortunately we Jews have a very limited vocabulary for thinking about the afterlife. We don’t often teach about it or even talk about it. And this may be for many of you the first time you’ve ever heard a rabbi speak about it from the bimah!

I suspect there are a number of reasons for this: First and foremost, Christianity’s overarching emphasis on the afterlife as a cornerstone of belief probably has the effect of distancing Jews from spending too much time on that subject. Like so many other ideas that Christianity appropriated from Judaism over many centuries, people began thinking that those ideas were actually Christian ideas, even though their origins were entirely Jewish. So since Christians talk about heaven and hell so much and in such fantastical detail, for Jews it became *past nischt*, we just don’t go there. We Jews also tend to be a pretty rationalistic community also. Outside of certain kabbalistic, mystical circles, most Jews are interested more in *tachlis*, this-world kinds of issues more than speculation about what we simply do not know. And we can’t overlook the fact that unlike ‘monotheism’ or ‘tikkun olam/making the world a better place,’ for which there is universal Jewish agreement, ideas about the afterlife are incredibly diverse; no single doctrine has the official Jewish stamp of approval. All of this contributes, I suspect, to our unfamiliarity with this topic.

You must admit, though, that Jewish ambivalence about the afterlife is rather strange given how much we refer to it in our prayers! No fewer than three times a day, the third benediction of the Amidah ends with the words: *Barukh Atah Adonai, Meḥayei ha'Meitim. Praised are You, God, who gives life to the dead.* On nearly every Jewish headstone are the letters: *Tav, Nun, Tzadi, Bet, Hey*, which stand for the phrase: *Tehi nishmato tzaror bitzror ha'ḥayim*, or 'may that person's soul be bound up in eternal life'. That phrase is also incorporated in the *El Malei Raḥamim* memorial prayer that we recite regularly at gravesides and funeral services. How many of you have had an *aliyah* to the Torah and recited those blessings? You probably know them by heart! The blessing after the reading contains the words: *ve'ḥayei olam nata betokheinu, You God have implanted within us eternal life.* At the end of the hymn *Yigdal*, which concludes every Friday night service we sing: *Meitim yehayei El b'rov ḥasdo, God will lovingly restore life to the dead...* which by the way is considered #13 of the Rambam's classic "13 Principles of [the Jewish] Faith." Pay attention also to the Yizkor prayers we are about to recite...each Yizkor paragraph ends with the words: *Sova s'maḥot et panekha, n'imot bimin'kha netzah...* *May your loved one rest eternally in dignity and peace.* I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say, 'You know, Judaism doesn't really emphasize the afterlife, we're much more focused on this life.' Or 'the Torah doesn't really say very much about it, so we really don't know what we believe...' I think I've even been guilty of saying some of those things myself at times. Of course it's true that Judaism is deeply invested in this world and the concerns of this world, and the importance of this life. But to suggest that Judaism isn't interested in the afterlife or doesn't emphasize the afterlife, is, I contend, a profound **misreading** of our sacred texts and traditions.

In addition to my childhood conversations with my grandmother, I had another early influence who got me thinking about the afterlife...and that was none other than the great Fred Sanford. Do you remember Fred Sanford? When I was a kid in the late 70's, Red Foxx played the role of a widower and a junk yard owner named Fred Sanford, who lived with his son Lamont in South Central LA. Well, whenever Lamont would argue with his father, Fred would grab his heart as if having a heart attack, stagger a bit, look up at the sky and cry out to his deceased wife, "Oh Elizabeth, this is the big one, I'm coming to join ya' honey!" The truth is that Fred Sanford's view of that afterlife was pretty consistent with the Torah's. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, as well as Moses and Aaron just prior to their deaths are said to be "gathered unto [their] kin, *ne'esaph al*

ami.”² King Solomon’s death was described as going ‘to sleep with his ancestors.’³ Now you might say, that just refers to interment in the family crypt or burial ground. The problem is that they are not all buried in the same place...Abraham is buried in Hevron along with Sarah, where he is later joined by his sons and some of their wives, Moses is buried on Mt. Nebo, Aaron is buried in Mt. Hor, Rachel is buried Bethlehem, Miriam is buried in Kadesh, King Solomon was buried in Jerusalem, in *Ir David*. What can it possibly mean for the Torah to say that they are gathered unto their ancestors if their ancestors are buried all over *Eretz Yisrael*? Rather, I believe that this is one of the earliest evidences we have that the Torah believed that at least something of the afterlife involved a reunion with predeceased relatives. Even when people report about near death experiences today, or describe dreams that come to them just prior to passing away, they often say they had a vision of a late relative either beckoning them or encouraging them to return to life.

Now I have been guilty of saying that the Torah is rather silent on the whole issue of life after death. **And I want to publicly repent of that now.** We often hear that the Torah’s agenda was to sanitize the Jewish people of everything they experienced in Egypt, including the death cult for which the ancient Egyptians were so famous. But I recently read a totally life changing essay by University of Georgia professor and Bible scholar Richard Elliot Friedman, who also happens to be a Conservative Rabbi. He wrote⁴ that if the Torah didn’t believe in an afterlife, which was a predominant (maybe the most predominant) Egyptian belief, **it would have come right out and said so!** The Torah spares no effort in condemning all kinds of Egyptian beliefs and practices: its idols, its altars and shrines, its sexual deviances, its sacrifices. The Torah is certainly not shy about describing what it doesn’t like about Egypt...but nowhere does the Torah condemn a belief in the afterlife which was perhaps the most elaborate part of ancient Egyptian culture. You’ve seen the great pyramids, which are in fact huge tombs. You’ve seen the sarcophagi, and the mummies, and the necropolis of the dead. If the Torah didn’t want you to accept the widespread Egyptian belief in an afterlife, it would have added that to the list of outright condemnations. Does the Torah *emphasize* this belief system? No. But there’s a

² Genesis 49:29, for example

³ I Kings 11:43

⁴ Death and Afterlife: The Biblical Silence, Richard Elliot Friedman, in Judaism in Late Antiquity: Death, Life-After-Death, Resurrection & The World-to-Come in the Judaisms of Antiquity (Part IV). Alan J. Avery-Peck & Jacob Neusner, Ed.

difference between not emphasizing it, and not believing it. That's where the Bible parts ways with Egypt. The Bible introduces the radical notion that *this* world actually matters; that not all of our energy and attention should be focused on the afterlife. But that in no way should be interpreted to mean that the afterlife is not meant to be a core Jewish belief.

In so many places the Hebrew Bible speaks of the afterlife: In I Samuel 28 the prophet Samuel is conjured by a medium—it's a wonderful story, and the best part of it is that the first thing that Samuel does upon his soul being roused by the medium is to express annoyance for being disturbed from the restful state that he was in! What a comforting image! Isaiah 26 says that God will revive the dead, "let corpses arise." *Ve'ereetz refaim tapil*. "The land of *refaim*, of departed souls will come to life." When Sari and I lived in Jerusalem, we had a lovely little apartment in a section of the city known as Emek Refaim. It's a great neighborhood with trendy coffee shops, boutiques, ice cream parlors, and old fashioned bakeries. While living there though, I learned that the valley of this chic Jerusalem enclave is derived from Isaiah's reference to the valley of departed souls...which made going out at night a little unnerving! Ezekiel 37 speaks of a collective resurrection of the Jewish people; the very last verse of the Book of Daniel describes a resurrection of the dead, not immediately upon death, but *l'keitz ha'yamim*, at the end of days. These have both become common Jewish beliefs: that the dead essentially rest until the end of days, when they will all be revived together for eternal life. And let's go back to the very beginning, when God creates man and woman, God forms them out of the dust of the earth. But what transforms them from a clump of clay into crown of creation is the *nishmat hayyim*: God blows into their nostrils the *neshama*...the soul, the wind of life.⁵ That speaks to me more than anything about the duality of what it means to be human. We are indeed physical beings of flesh and blood, and that physicality is limited, and mortal, and frail. That physical part of us will die and be buried and become part of the earth, whence it came. *Ki afar atah, v'el afar tashuv*...For you are dust, and to dust shall you return.⁶ But there is also a part of us that is not physical. That's the part of us that is made in God's image. Think about it, the part of us that is in God's image it cannot be physical, because God is not physical. It must be our soul that is created in God's image—and just as God is eternal so too is the soul. That part of us, our tradition teaches, does not die when the physical body dies, but continues to live on. Now I want to pause here to

⁵ Genesis 2:7

⁶ Genesis 3:19

say that I have no idea what any of this means. I really can't conceive of myself without a body. I don't know what a postmortem, disembodied existence looks like. It is totally beyond my ability to comprehend. That is the humility of Judaism. The Talmud so honestly states that the afterlife is something that "no eye has seen."⁷ The mechanics are the domain of God, not the human mind. There are certain things we will not comprehend until we experience them, and this chief among them.

Now today is Yom Kippur: A day when we repeatedly invoke God as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Universe, *Ha'dan yehidi le'vaei olam*. The *shofet tzedek*, the righteous judge; *Hayom, timhol ve'tislah lekhoh avonoteinu*...Forgive and pardon all of our sins on this day. Whether you're reading the mahzor on the English side or the Hebrew side of the page, whether you've been dozing off today or you've stayed wide awake, the idea that we are accountable for our deeds is inescapable; and the reason for that is that our tradition teaches that **our lives matter, they matter to God**. What we do with this time we've been granted on earth is incredibly significant and meaningful. Isn't that the central theme of all of these holidays?! And when we leave this world, we will also stand before the Holy One and review how we treated this gift; how we used this precious life we were given. Oh how I wish that more people lived with a glimmer of eternity in their eyes! Imagine how it might alter their lives and urge them to be better people! This world, said Rabbi Ya'akov in the Mishnah, is a lobby for the banquet hall of the world to come. *Hat'kein atzmakh*--Constantly improve yourself, prepare yourself, better yourself so that you can enter into that banquet hall.⁸

Thankfully, we also believe that God is overflowing with *rachmanus* for us, with mercy. *Anu malei avonot v'Atah malei rachamim*—we are so sated with sin, but you are so sated with righteousness, we say in the mahzor. In other religious traditions, God seems like a brutal torturer. I could never identify with religions that promote a God who sentences countless millions to an eternity of hell and torment. And I am in the extreme minority, because billions of people in this world believe just that: If you don't accept in our dogma, our interpretation of scripture, our understanding of the Divine, then you are destined for eternal damnation. I'm sure you've heard this before. Maybe you've had someone try to 'save you' from that inferno.

⁷ Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 99a

⁸ Mishna Avot 4:21

That's not our belief, friends, in fact the Rambam wrote that not only do all Jews have a place in the world to come, but that the righteous of all nations have a place in the world to come.⁹ What a beautiful idea—you don't have to be Jewish, you don't have to believe and practice what we believe or do what we do in order to achieve salvation. Much more important, much more critical is how you behave! **Your deeds are what speak for you.** Are you a good, honest, ethical person? That's what matters most, not your specific religious affiliation. We will all be judged—Jew and non-Jew, and we may suffer the embarrassment and shame of having to come face to face with our sins. That may be the Jewish version of hell, by the way—that intense and naked process of review and examination. But in the end the God who loves mercy extends that mercy to us. That's another radical point of departure for Judaism. Most people will survive the scrutiny of the heavenly court. Only the worst and most unrepentant will the fate of being forever distanced from the God Who loves life, and wishes to shelter us for eternity in His holy presence.

The story is told¹⁰ of the great Rabbi Yoel Sirkis, who is also known as the Baḥ, an abbreviation for his magnum opus, the *Bayit Hadash*, an early commentary on the *Shulhan Arukh*, the Code of Jewish Law. The Baḥ lived in the early 1600's and was the greatest scholar of his generation. It is said that he hardly ate or slept, because he spent all of his time learning and teaching and helping the Jewish people in Krakow, where he was the Chief Rabbi. Nearing the end of his life he prayed that if he should merit entering Heaven, who will be his neighbor? Good question, right? If I'm going to spend eternity anywhere, I'd like to know who will be living next door. So because he was so holy and so pious he received an answer from Heaven: your neighbor for eternity will be a certain wealthy Jew named Reb Moishe, who lives in Lemberg, about 200 miles east of Krakow. So the Bach decided that he had to see this man who was destined to be his neighbor in Heaven. He must be a great scholar, the Baḥ thought to himself, maybe an illustrious kabbalist. He traveled to Lemberg and there he saw Reb Moishe. He was indeed quite rich, and a *ba'al tzedakah*—he was generous, and seemed like a nice enough guy. But when it came to Torah, he wasn't particularly learned or accomplished. The Baḥ grew increasingly angry at God. I dedicated my life to Torah study, to serving the Jewish people—I

⁹ Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:5

¹⁰ Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach would tell this story about the Baḥ, one of his own distant relatives

barely had enough time for my own family. Why should this rich Yid be next to me in Heaven? What a chutzpah!

Just as he was about to leave Lemberg—brooding and irritated—he was told that on that particular evening Reb Moishe's son was getting married. Now it was the custom in Europe at that time that all the poor people from the city would be invited to attend weddings...especially the weddings of wealthy families. So the Baḣ disguised himself as a poor person and sat at the back of the wedding hall.

As Reb Moishe walked his son to the huppah, there was a huge, terrible cry—someone was weeping from the depths of their heart. R. Moishe stopped and asked, who is crying? A boy in rags in the corner was weeping terribly. Why are you crying so much, asked R. Moishe. The boy said, perhaps you remember my father. He was the richest man in Lemberg. When I was 4 years old I was engaged to the girl that your son is marrying now. The truth is, I love her so much, so very much. She is my soul mate. But my father went bankrupt and her parents insisted that she marry a rich husband, and so she was engaged to your son.

R. Moishe said, let's call the bride and see what she says. Is it true, he asked her. Yes, it's true...he really is my soul mate and I love him too so very much. But my father forced me to marry your son.

Gevalt, cried R. Moishe. Master of the Universe, thank you so much for preventing such a crime! He said to his son, you know what's going on here? She's his bride—you better go change garments with him right now. He went back and gave the poor boy his outfit, his kittel, his tallis, everything. And Reb Moishe said to the poor boy, from now on you too are my son, and in every way that I had pledged to support this marriage, I promise to support you, and to love you like my own child.

And the Baḣ reported that he never saw a father dance at a wedding like Reb Moishe danced at this wedding. When I came to Lemberg, he said, I couldn't understand why this rich guy would be sitting next to me in Heaven. When I left, I couldn't understand how I could have the privilege of sitting next to such a holy Jew for eternity.

The afterlife is a tremendous mystery even to a great tzaddik like the Bah. But whatever it is, our tradition teaches that it is a place of mercy and peace; of the eternal and everlasting embrace of the Holy One; of the reuniting of the souls of our ancestors and loved ones who passed before us from this world to the next. May we live our lives each day so that we deserve to enter into that great banquet hall; that whatever sins we have committed will be outweighed by our faith, our goodness, our devotion to Torah and mitzvot, our deeds of loving-kindness, and our desire to treat this life as the infinitely precious, beautiful gift that it is...