

Resurrection and Rebirth – Shabbat Vayeshev/Hanukkah 5784

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Mazal Tov. That's a good place to start. It's the celebratory version of the greeting Israelis have been using for 8-weeks: *besorot tovot*. May the joy of this moment foreshadow better news and brighter experiences for the Jewish people and our beleaguered world. What a perfect prayer on what – in terms of daylight hours – is one of the darkest days of the year. The sun is shining, but this is a season of darkness.

Now, I ask as an introduction to the sermon: What is the connective thread that brings together the story of Joseph, the beginning of Hanukkah, Sage's bat mitzvah, the rise in antisemitism, and the war in Israel? Before I answer, I should give thanks to Rabbi Elie Kaunfer of the Hadar Institute for putting the idea in my head during a session at the Conservative Movement Convening in Baltimore earlier this week. I missed much of the session due to traffic, but I still think I absorbed as many nuggets of inspiration during the last 15 minutes of that session as I did during the other 3 days of the convention. Anyway, the connective thread is ... Resurrection. (How many of you saw that coming? A rabbi speaking about resurrection 2 weeks before Christmas!)

I invite you to open a *siddur* to page 156 – a or b; it doesn't matter. The second blessing of the Amidah, which we will recite shortly, centers on the concept of *techiyat ha-metim*, resurrection of the dead. It is a messianic concept that challenges modern Jews in a way we can't fully explore right now. The tradition is that our patriarch Isaac composed this blessing when he was spared on Abraham's altar. An ancient midrash posits that Isaac's soul departed when his father raised the knife, but God restored it. And when Isaac awoke, he blurted out the words, "*Barukh atah Adonai me-hayye ha-metim*, Praised are You Adonai who gives life to the dead." It is translated in our *siddur* as "Master of life and death," and the reason for that loose translation is a subject for a different discussion we can't have right now.

I want to read in the middle of 156a or b: "אתה גבור לעולם אדני, Your might, Adonai, is boundless. You give life to the dead; great is Your saving power. You cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall. Your love sustains the living, Your great mercies give life to the dead. You support the falling, heal the sick, free the fettered (or: release the imprisoned)." And the question is: what do these things have in common? Why are we reading about rain in a prayer about resurrection? And what about healing the sick and releasing the imprisoned? The answer is that these are all experiences of resurrection.

Winter is the season of death. The leaves fall off the trees, the crops stop growing, the sun disappears. And in Israel, it is also the rainy season. It doesn't rain in Israel in the summer. Israel depends on the rain that falls in the winter – during the season of death – to moisten the soil and create a bountiful rebirth in spring. Particularly in Israel, rain brings about resurrection!

Same with recovery from illness. Today, when a person goes to the hospital or receives a diagnosis, we generally expect them to recover. Dying from disease is the exception. But not all that long ago, it was the rule. To recover from illness is to be resurrected.

That is also the experience of being released from prison. Last week, the Wall Street Journal told the story of Wichai Kalapat, a 28-year-old farm worker from Thailand who was taken hostage by Hamas on October 7. His family was sure he had been killed. They held a memorial service without a body. And when he appeared last Saturday, “Lazarus-like” (to quote the Wall Street Journal) and pronounced “I’m not dead yet!” it was an experience of resurrection.

There’s your connection to Joseph. Our Torah portion ended with Joseph in prison, but we know the rest of the story. Next week, Pharaoh will dream about the fat and skinny cows, and Joseph will be released from prison to interpret the dreams. The Torah says, “*va-yeritzuhu min ha-bor*, they rushed Joseph from the *bor*.” In context, “*bor*” means “prison,” but “*bor*” also means “pit.” The pit into which the brothers throw Joseph in today’s reading is also called “*bor*.”

And the pit is akin to death:

- That is what Reuben had in mind when he suggested throwing Joseph in there. “Let us not take his life,...” he said. “Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves...”. The medieval scholar Rashbam comments that the pit was a place devoid of life. “Throw him down there *veyamut me-elav*, so he will die on his own.”
- We read of that place, “*v’habor reik, ein bo mayyim*, Now the pit was empty; there was no water in it.” Water is life. The absence of water means death.
- Judah has the same intention when he suggests selling Joseph into slavery: “What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood?” he says. “Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves.” We don’t want to be murderers, but we expect him to die nonetheless.
- When the Torah says that Jacob was “brought down” to Egypt, “*ויוסף הורד מצרימה*,” we are supposed to think of the casket going down to the darkest of places.
- And note the repeated references to rending garments. The brothers rip Joseph’s coat and cover it in blood. Jacob assumes Joseph has been ripped apart by beasts and he tears his clothes. Later, when Joseph refuses to sleep with Potiphar’s wife, what does she do? She rips his coat. Ripping clothing is an act of mourning.

Joseph’s is not a “near death experience.” It’s the real thing! When Joseph emerges from prison and assumes a seat of power in Egypt, that is resurrection.

And while Joseph is just one person, the Torah doesn’t intend for us to read this as a single instance “poor boy makes good.” Joseph’s experience foretells the experience of his descendants who will be slaves in Egypt. They, too, will emerge. They will be reborn as a people! And that story foretells the future for our people in exile. It is why we invite Elijah to the seder. The same God who redeemed our people from slavery in Egypt will redeem us from the vicissitudes of history, from the pain of exile. Freedom from fetters is a form of resurrection ... for individuals as well as the Jewish nation.

That is the *Tikvah*, the “hope” of Zionism – that a people imprisoned and persecuted by the villains of history would be released, that a nation left for dead would be reborn in its ancestral

homeland. Certainly, in this period of war. ... We have witnessed the horrors, the hostages, the displaced persons, the death and destruction. And now we pray for release, renewal, and rebirth.

As a child, I was taught the Zionist Hanukkah song, "*Banu Choshekh L'garesh.*" I will spare you my singing, but the words have been stuck in my head, and they have gotten louder with the arrival of Hanukkah.

We have come to banish night. ...
Each of us is one small light,
But together we burn bright.
Go away darkness. ...
Go away. Make way for light.

The song is not directed at a single enemy. It is directed at circumstances. We call on

- The God who saved Joseph from prison in Egypt,
- The same God who made the Maccabees victorious in Jerusalem and freed the first groups of hostages in Gaza,
- The God who brings healing to those who are ill, and who will enable our world to emerge from the dead days of winter to the rebirth of spring,
- The God who gives us strength to celebrate with Sage even in dark times.

May that God soon save us from war, and redeem us from history, and restore our hope to live as a free people in our own land.

We pray because we believe. "*V'ne-eman atah l'hahayot metim,* You are faithful, God, to create life wherever there is death." May that be Your will. *Ken yehi ratzon.*