

Second Day of Rosh HaShanah 5779/ 2018

What Happens AFTER You Die & What You Should Do BEFORE You Die?

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This sermon is dedicated to my cousin, Andrew Windman z"l (1986-2018),
who died of a brain tumor on Feb. 16, 2018 (12:08 AM/ before sunset)

Rosh Chodesh Adar, 1 Adar 5778 at the age of 32

Chanan Ari ben Yoseph Yisrael v'Rivkah Ruchel

"WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YOU DIE?" This is a question that many people seem preoccupied with, including the writers and producers of several popular films & TV shows. Interestingly enough, many of these movies & programs use humor to address this serious topic:

- **Oh God** (1977-John Denver, with George Burns as God)
- **Heaven Can Wait** (1978-Warren Beatty & Buck Henry as The Escort/Guardian Angel) (based on 1941, **Here Comes Mister Jordan**)
- **Defending Your Life** (1991 American romantic comedy fantasy film starring Albert Brooks & Meryl Street.)¹
- **Evan Almighty** (2007- Steve Carrell, with Morgan Freeman as God)
- * **Drop Dead Diva** (legal comedy-drama/fantasy TV series) (2009-2014)
6 seasons (Lifetime, Netflix) (Brooke Elliott) (Guardian Angels) ²
- * **The Good Place.** (fantasy-comedy TV series on NBC) (first season: Sept. 2016)
(3rd season begins on Sept. 27, 2018) Kristen Bell & Ted Danson as Michael, Architect of the Good Place³.

¹ 1991 American [romantic comedy-fantasy film](#) about a man who dies and arrives in the [afterlife](#) only to find that he

² It stars [Brooke Elliott](#) as Jane, a plus-sized lawyer whose body is inhabited by the soul of a fashion model. The series revolves around vapid aspiring model, Deborah "Deb" Dobkins, who is killed in a car crash on the way to an audition for [The Price Is Right](#). As her soul enters the gates of Heaven, she finds herself being judged by a gatekeeper named Fred. As a result of her shallowness, Fred declares her a "zero-zero", since she has performed zero good deeds and zero bad deeds during her time on Earth. While he is distracted, Deb presses the "return" key before Fred can stop her, and is brought back to life in the body of a recently deceased lawyer named Jane Bingum, who died protecting her boss, Jay Parker

³ The series focuses on Eleanor Shellstrop ([Kristen Bell](#)), a woman who wakes up in the [afterlife](#) and is introduced by Michael ([Ted Danson](#)) to "The Good Place", a [Heaven-like utopia](#) he designed, in reward for her [righteous](#) life. She realizes that she was sent there by mistake and must hide her morally imperfect behavior and try to become a better

“WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YOU DIE?” Since being ordained as a rabbi 14 years ago, I have been asked this question many times. Some people pose the question as follows:

- What will happen to **me** when I die? Or
- What will happen to **my loved one** when he/she dies?

Other people have posed variations of this question, such as

- What is the **Jewish** perspective on what happens after you die? OR
- Do Jews believe in **heaven & hell**?

Of course, the issues of mortality & immortality are especially salient for individuals with a terminal illness and their family members. But these topics are of interest to all of us as we age & confront our own immortality. Over the past few years, with so many deaths in this congregation, as well as in my own family & among my friends’ parents, I have spent much time pondering these questions.

For those of you who are interested in learning more about this topic, the title of this year’s Thursday Lunch & Learn series is **Touring the Jewish Lifecycle: From Birth to Death to the Afterlife**. The final session of the series is entitled, **Journey to Heaven: Touring the Jewish Afterlife**. Together, we will explore such concepts as *Gehennom & Gan Eden* (the Jewish version of Hell & Heaven), *Olam HaBa* (the World to Come), the *Mashiach* (Messiah), *Gilgul Neshamot* (transmigration of souls), & *T’chiyat Ha-Metim* (resurrection of the dead).

Now, lest you think that **resurrection** is not part of Jewish tradition, think again. **According to the Mishnah, as well as to the Rambam (Maimonides), belief in the resurrection of the dead is one of the most fundamental doctrines of Judaism**. The Rabbis of the Mishnah did not have to look too far to find explicit references to resurrection in the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible). Most notably, the prophets Eliyahu (Elijah) & Elisha both brought people back to life from the realm of the dead.

person.

There are also several **rabbinic commentaries on today's Torah reading from Parashat VaYera** that have a **resurrection motif**. In the Torah, Genesis Chapter 22 tells the story of *Akedat Yitzchak*, the Binding & Near-Sacrifice of Isaac. From the very beginning, the Torah informs us that God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is only a test:

"Va-yehi achar ha-d'varim ha-eleh v'ha-Elohim nisa et Avraham."

"It was after those things, that God tested Avraham."

According to the *peshat* (plain meaning) of the biblical text, just as Abraham was about to bring the knife to his son's neck, an angel of God stopped him, saying:

"Avraham! Avraham! Al tishlach yadcha el ha-naar v'al taas lo meumah"

"Abraham! Abraham! Do not raise your hand against the boy or do anything to him." It seems obvious that Isaac is alive at the end of the story. Yet, in **Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer (Chapter 31), Midrash HaGadol, Midrash VaYosha, & Shibolay HaLeket (chapter 18)**, we get a slightly different account⁴.

Rabbi Ryan Dulkan translates the Midrash as follows⁵:

Both of his legs and his arms were bound tight. He appeared like an animal--a sheep ready for the slaughter. His father hovered above him. He could hear the muffled choking back of tears as his father reached for the cool blade. He witnessed the sword's arc as it swung up into the air, and with terrible fright watched the blade's descent. At the moment he felt the cool steal touch his neck, **his soul burst open and left his body** ("*parcha v'yatza nishmato*"). Time froze as he witnessed his lifeless body bound on the altar. Suddenly, he heard a disembodied voice break forth from the heavens: *"Al tishlach yadcha el ha-naar v'al taas lo meumah"*

"Abraham! Abraham! Do not raise your hand against the boy or do anything to him." Isaac heard the Divine Injunction, **his soul returned to its body** ("*chazrah ha-nefesh l'gufo*") His limbs were no longer bound. He picked himself up from off the altar and stood on his own two feet. He was suddenly filled with a profound awareness--he would be a sign for future times; his resurrection was a portent, that in the future, all the dead will be revived. In fear and trembling, Isaac uttered [the words], "Blessed are you Adonai, Who Revives the Dead." "*Baruch Atah Adonai M'Chayeh Ha-Metim.*"

⁴ See article by David Jay Derovan: "The Resurrection Motif in the Midrash on Akedat Yitzchak". Also refer to the book, The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah by Shalom Spiegel

⁵ Dvar Torah by Ryan Dulkan on Parashat VaYera written for 2003 JTS class with Burt Visotzky

The words that Isaac uttered on the altar as he was brought back to life may sound familiar to some of you. They comprise the *chatimah*, the concluding line, of the 2nd blessing of the Amidah. You may have recited these very words yourself today if you were here for Shacharit. And you will have a chance to recite them again later on during Musaf. While the Hebrew words are the same in all Conservative & Orthodox prayer books, the English translations can be very different from one Machzor or Siddur to the next. For example:

A) Orthodox translation: **Art Scroll:**

"Blessed are You, HaShem, who **resuscitates the dead.**"

B) Orthodox translation: **Koren** "Blessed are You, *Adonai*, who **revives the dead.**"

C) Conservative translation: ***Siddur Sim Shalom (blue)***-

"Praised are You *Adonai*, **Master of life & death.**"

D) Conservative: ***Siddur Lev Shalem (red)***: "*Baruch Atah Adonai* **who gives life to the dead.**"

E) ***Machzor Chadash*** (non-denominational, but used by many non-Orthodox congregations, including TBA, on the High Holidays) "Praised are You, O Lord, **who grants immortality to the departed.**"

You may notice how some of these translations leave open the possibility of a metaphorical interpretation of Isaac's words, despite the fact that the midrashim are clearly indicate a literal translation, in which Isaac is specifically referring to physical resurrection of the dead. Apparently, the translators of the Conservative prayer books may have been uncomfortable with the idea of bodies being physically resurrected after death./ The translators of Reform Siddurim & Machzorim felt so uncomfortable with this concept that they changed the words of the Hebrew blessing altogether, replacing the words "*M'chayeh ha-Metim* to "*M'chayeh ha-Kol*". Rejecting the idea of physical resurrection outright, leaders of the Reform movement changed the last line of the second blessing of the Amidah to "Blessed are you God who brings all things to life."

Resurrection of the dead (*t'chiyat ha-metim*) is one of many Jewish concepts that address the question: "**What happens AFTER you die?**" There is a related question that I wish more people thought about & perhaps some of you are already wondering, "**What should do you do BEFORE you die?**"

There is a book by **Dr. Ron Wolfson**, entitled, "**The Seven Questions You're Asked in Heaven**". Whether or not you believe that the Jewish afterlife includes a place called "heaven" where God will ask us questions, these questions are important ones to ask ourselves **while we are still alive**.

Even though the starting premise of this book is, "These are the questions that people will have to answer at the end of their lives," Dr. Wolfson's intention in writing this book is **not to get us to focus on the after-life./ Rather, it is to get us to focus on this life**. By knowing the questions ahead of time, we can use the questions to **shape a life well-lived, a life of purpose and meaning**.

The 7 questions that form the framework of Dr. Wolfson's book are taken from a few different traditional Jewish sources. One of the questions is attributed to **Meshulam Zusya of Hanipoli**, an 18th century Hasidic leader in Eastern Europe. Another question is attributed to **Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch**, the intellectual founder of Orthodox Judaism in the 19th century. The other 5 questions are attributed to **Rava**, an influential Rabbi among the Babylonian scholars who lived in the 4th century. Rava's questions can be found in **Masechet Shabbat (31a** ff.) of the Babylonian Talmud.

The questions are

- 1) *Were you **honest**? ("Nasata v'natata b'emunah?")*
- 2) *Did you leave a **legacy**? ("Asakta b'friyah u-riviyah?")*
- 3) *Did you set aside time to **study**? ("Kavata itim la-Torah?")*
- 4) *Did you have **hope** in your heart? ("Tzipita li-yeshuah?")*
- 5) *Did you get your **priorities** straight?
("Pilpalta b'chochmah? Hevanta davar mitoch davar?")*
- 6) *Did you **enjoy** this world?*
- 7) *Were you **the best you could be**?*

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These 7 questions are worth addressing today & when you get to heaven.

If you work towards answering these 7 questions in the "affirmative", you can make your life matter, here in this world. (**BIG PAUSE**)

In **Pirkei Avot 2:15**, there is a teaching by **Rabbi Eliezer** <sup>6</sup>,  
"Shuv yom echad lifnei mitatach."  
"Repent (do *teshuvah*) one day before the day of your death."

One way to understand this teaching is that Rabbi Eliezer is addressing people who are terminally ill, individuals who know that they will die one day soon: if not tomorrow, then sometime in the near future. Understood in this way, one practical implication of this teaching is that on one's deathbed, one should seek forgiveness from God and from other people. In Judaism, there is a deathbed confessional in which a person says "I'm sorry" for the wrongs he/she has done during his lifetime. This confessional is known as the *Vidui*, the very same word that is used to describe the "*Ashamnu*" & "*Al Chet*" parts of Yom Kippur services. During my rabbinate, I have had the *zechut* of sitting alongside many individuals during their last days (and sometimes even the last moments) of life as I listened to them recite or [as I] recited on their behalf the words of the *Vidui*.

So, perhaps this is one way to understand Rabbi Eliezer's teaching. Yes, perhaps Rabbi Eliezer is just addressing those who are dying and who know they're dying./ But it is also possible that Rabbi Eliezer is addressing a broader audience. After all, most people do not know in advance that they are dying. Many people die unexpectedly, whether it's from a heart attack, a stroke, or unfortunate accident.

The Talmud (in Masechet **Shabbat 153a**) explains that the true meaning of Rabbi Eliezer's teaching is that we should be engaged in a process of *teshuvah* (repentance) every day, since most of us do not know exactly when we are going to die, which makes the day before the day of our death equally uncertain

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⁶ This is the same rabbi who teaches in Pirkei Avot 2:15, "Don't be quick to anger"

Expanding upon the Talmud's interpretation of Rabbi Eliezer's statement, another lesson may be: Since you never know what tomorrow may bring, since today may in fact be the day before you die (*chas v'chalilah*), you should live each day in a meaningful way, filled with as much joy as possible. Not only should you do *teshuvah*, to make amends for mistakes you may have made in the past, but you should also ask yourself: Have I said everything I wanted to say to the special people in my life, or **have some things been left unsaid?** Have I done whatever I had hoped and planned to do in my life, or **have I left anything important undone?**

Living each day as if ("k'ilu") today will be your last means that you shouldn't squander your time, you shouldn't postpone checking items off of your "bucket list", & you shouldn't postpone trying to become a better person. Don't put any of this off until tomorrow, because tomorrow may never come. Wouldn't it be nice to **leave this world without any regrets?!**

I often give this type of advice to congregants who are terminally ill. I have also encouraged or worked with some dying congregants on writing an **ethical will**. As you know, a Last Will & Testament is a tool for articulating what you would like to pass on, in the sense of monetary and material goods, to your loved ones and to charitable and communal organizations. An Ethical Will, on the other hand, is a tool for preserving and passing on your **values, beliefs, life lessons, hopes for the future, love, and forgiveness**. An Ethical Will is essentially a **written spiritual legacy** to your spouse or significant other, your children, grandchildren, parents, siblings, friends, colleagues, students, and the members of your community. In it, you can **articulate how you would like to be remembered**. An Ethical Will also gives you an opportunity to tell your loved ones **how you feel about them**.

Ethical wills take various forms. They can be long or they can be short. They can be general or very detailed. Some ethical wills even include specific details about what you want your surviving loved ones to do from the time of your death and through the funeral. If you are interested in writing an ethical will, set up an appointment to meet with me after the holidays and I can help you get started. I can also recommend you some great books to you that will guide you step-by-step in the process of writing an ethical will.⁷ Some of these books also provide some wonderful examples of Ethical Wills that have been written by others⁸.

To conclude my sermon today, I would like to share with you excerpts from 3 Ethical Wills: my own, which I wrote in 2002 & which I plan to update this year, as well as 2 Ethical Wills that were written more recently by members of Temple Beth Ahm.

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<sup>7</sup> Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury by [Jack Riemer](#);  
Ethical Wills & How to Prepare Them: A Guide to Sharing Your Values from Generation to Generation by [Rabbi Jack Riemer](#) (Editor), [Dr. Nathaniel Stampfer](#) (Editor), [Rabbi Harold S. Kushner](#) (Foreword);  
Ethical Wills: Putting Your Values on Paper by [Barry K. Baines](#) ;  
The Forever Letter: Writing What We Believe For Those We Love – September 8, 2017 by [Elana Zaiman](#)



Excerpt from my own Ethical Will 2002 (needs to be updated)-June 26, 2002/ 3:00-6:05 AM  
(I wrote this at the age of 36. Ariel was 6 ½ yrs old. Eva was 5 yrs old. Rivkah: 4 ½ months old.)

Dear Ariel, Eva & Rivkah,

Tomorrow, we will be going to Israel together for the first time. God willing, this will be the first of many such family trips to Eretz Yisrael. But, the current *matzav* has gotten me to think about what I would tell you if anything (God forbid) should happen to me. Daddy/Abba & I made some of our requests known in a Last Will and Testament (including who we want you to live with if we die) & our wish that you **maintain relationships with all of the members of our family.....**

Thus far, I have **written about what your living family members have to offer** you.... The focus of this ethical will is supposed to be what the deceased leaves for you. (It's hard to think of myself as deceased as I write this letter, but nevertheless.....)

Where do I begin?.... Let me start by explaining to you the reasoning behind one of the most difficult decisions I ever made in my life: the decision to go to Israel during this summer of 2002 /5762 [at the height of the Second Intifada]. This decision embodies many of the values that I share with Daddy and that we hope to pass on to you. ....

As the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, I know just how important it is to have a Jewish State. Never again will Jews be turned away from their land; as Jews, we need to know that there is a Jewish homeland to which we could all return if our 'host countries' kicked us out (like they did during the Shoah). / I must admit that for most of my life, I took Israel for granted.....Yet now, Israel is fighting for her very existence. And, a part of me began to fear that you, my children, would grow up in a world without a State of Israel. This motivated me and Daddy to go to Israel *davka* during this terrible *matzav*. I decided (with Daddy) that I wanted to take you to Israel because it is in danger of being destroyed... again.....

What is happening in Israel is not just an Israeli problem; it is a Jewish problem. Remember: *Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Ba-Zeh* ("All Jews are inter-connected and responsible for each other."). I could **not stand idly by and passively watch** the State of Israel crumble.....

You should learn to support Israel- not just in words, but with actions. Even more generally speaking, you should learn **not to stand idly by when you see wrongdoings being committed**. It is my hope that you will **always stand up for what you believe in** and that you will **intervene when you see injustice in the world**. You can live this legacy even as children. For example, when you see one child hurting another child's feelings, you should intervene; you would be held accountable if you just stood idly by and let one child bully another. Certainly, when you are adults, I would hope that you live by this value as well. **If you see something wrong in the world, do something about it**; if you're not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.

Another part of my legacy to you: constantly strive to make a difference in your own lives and in the lives of others. One of the values which I hold particularly dear is lifelong learning. As you can undoubtedly tell by all of the years that I have spent in school, I think that it is important to study and to learn new things throughout your life. This does not necessarily mean getting multiple degrees, or even learning in a formal school context. What is important is that you constantly strive to learn more- by reading, attending classes, participating in study groups, etc.

Your **Jewish heritage**, in particular, is so very rich that you will have barely scratched the surface if you discontinue your Jewish education after high school.

I also hope that you constantly **strive in the area of Jewish religious observance**- both with respect to *mitzvot beyn adam la-Makom* (ritual commandments, that deal with your relationship to God) and to *mitzvot beyn adam la-chavero* (commandments that deal with your interpersonal relationships). While it would certainly be nice for you to all live your lives as religiously observant egalitarian Jews (as Daddy/Abba & I do), I realize that you might each embark on a somewhat different spiritual path. And, even if you do all practice your Judaism in a similar way, you might each be motivated by a different set of reasons for observing the mitzvot. What is most important is that you **constantly strive to understand your religious heritage and to take on more religious observances**.

Addition based on Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner's ethical will to his children<sup>9</sup>:

[Ariel, Eva, & Rivkah], I do not know whether or not [any of you] will [even] **be observant Jews**. I **hope [that you] are, but not simply because I chose to be observant, but because [you] will have discovered Judaism's beauty for [yourselves]**. My responsibility as a committed Jewish parent is to set the stage and coach [you] to the best of my ability; the rest will be up to [you]. If [you] decide to abandon [your] practice of Judaism, I won't castigate [you] or berate myself, knowing that [Dad] and I did the best we could, and understanding that children must find their own way. Yes, it is my strong desire [that you] **marry Jews and raise Jewish children loyal to [our] people's heritage**. If [you] do not, you will be **severing our family's limb from a tree of Jewish peoplehood** that stretches back more than a hundred generations. I say this **not as a guilt trip**, but because it's the simple truth. As a Jew, I believe we have a responsibility to our ancestors to pass their values on to our children, as well as a responsibility to our children to ground them in their own heritage and history. That being said, [you], my children, will feel this or [you] won't. **If [you] do, and bring home a Jewish spouse, it won't matter to me whether or not [he or] she is a practicing Jew-by-birth or a sincere Jew-by-choice, white or black, a Jew who is Hispanic, [Asian], or Ethiopian....** Creating a Jewish home has nothing to do with the color of one's skin or the shape of one's eyes. Those who believe it does clearly need to work on cleansing their souls of some residual bigotry.

Most importantly, my dear *kinderlach*, I hope and pray that all three of you **strive to be the very best that you can be**. My greatest wishes for you are that you each **live up to your own individualized potential**, and that you **be happy**. I have always loved you for who you. From a distance, I will always love you and be proud of you for the individuals you choose to become.

Ariel, Eva, & Rivkah- You are my greatest accomplishments. I **thank you for giving me the gift of motherhood & I thank you for being such a source of blessing in my life**. I love you to pieces.

Love & Kisses,  
xoxoxoxoxoxox  
Mommy

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<sup>9</sup> <https://rabbiubliner.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/my-ethical-will-living-life-backwards-yom-kippur-5772.pdf>. <https://rabbiubliner.com/sermons-3/>

## **Ethical Will of Barbara Pasternak (d. March 2016/ Adar 5776)**

To the four loves of my life:

To my husband Ed and my three revered daughters:

I am so fortunate to have you and my fondest wish is that you go from strength to strength.

Ed, I could not survive without you. Your love and your calm caring manner have sustained me throughout our marriage.

Jessie, you have made me proud of your relationship with Stuart and your caring nature. I recall your Bat Mitzvah, your graduations from high school, college, and graduate school and of course, your marriage, your undaunted progression through the years.

Alison, you are a wonderful, independent woman - a teacher of handicapped children, a marathon runner, a yoga enthusiast. To each of your endeavors you always devote your entire energy and intensity.

Jean, I am so proud that you have made for yourself an independent life in New York City as a social worker. In addition, your knowledge of the sites of New York is phenomenal. May you always be happy in both your vocation and your avocation.

I am sure that you remember Great-grandma Lena. She was an independent woman whose mission in life was helping others. She took care of a number of her relatives including Grandma Louise when Grandpa died. She exemplifies the words of Hillel who said: *"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?" Ethics of the Fathers, 1:14*

Like Great grandma Lena, may you persevere in the knowledge that you are powerful, that you can do whatever you set out to do. With that strength you can accomplish great good in this world. Be ever vigilant of your abilities and confident that you can succeed on the noble course of life that you have chosen. Be ever strong and true. Never give up despite adversity. Always be proud of what you have accomplished so that you may be sustained as you move forward in life.

## Ethical Will of **Barbara Saka (d. August 2018/ Elul 5778)**

I was born on November 22, 1958 at Brooklyn Jewish Hospital. My very first memory was in Asbury Park, NJ. I was about 3 or 4 years old. We were standing in front of the auction near Madame Marie's. I was wearing a beautiful dress and I looked to my mother who asked me not to get it dirty. I remember clear as day, looking up to my mother. My mother always told me I was doted on as a young child and I was pleasant and I love knowing that. I have other memories through the years but that is my very first one. Some of my favorite memories in this life are trips I took with family. Cruising, Israel, Paris, London and Vegas! I wish I could have taken more. Fast forward to when I had breast cancer and my mother and I became closer than ever and more like best friends. I miss my mother so much and more than anything, I am looking forward to being with her again and I know I am preparing for a trip of a lifetime, home. So know that I am happy because I am home and with mom.

Complaining is futile but I do regret not having had a child. I spent my life wanting a husband and kids and I really thought that if I had that, everything would be right in the world. I spent so much time looking or thinking I needed to have that, that I didn't realize the gifts in front of my face. The gifts of health and being able to walk, the gift of making a decision to take a walk on a nice day, relationships with friends and family, the ability to plan and take trips, going out for lunch, playing Mahjong! These are all amazing gifts! Being in the position I have been for the past year I have had time to think about what I could have done differently with this gift of life, it is simple and so I offer this advice to you who are still here .

**" Stop looking for something you think you need or want. Enjoy and cherish what you have. Take the time to acknowledge all that you do have. It is all right in front of you and it is wonderful!"**

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Barbara Saka passed away last month on the 5th of Elul 5778 (August 16, 2018 before sunset).

Barbara Pasternak died on the 23rd of Adar (Aleph) 5776 (March 3, 2016)

May the memories of both Barbaras be for a blessing. *Zichronan livracha.*
And may their **written spiritual legacies** inspire all of us to write our own Ethical Wills & to live our lives to the fullest.

As we begin the New Year and ponder deep questions such as, **"What will happen to me AFTER I die?"**, let us also address the question that we have much more control over:

What should I do BEFORE I die?

What can I do and what can I say while I am still alive (in This World) to make a difference & to make my life matter.

L'Shanah Tovah U-Metukah.

May you all have a good, happy, healthy, & sweet New Year.

DAVID JAY DEROVAN: The Resurrection Motif in the Midrash on Akedat Yitzchak

Of all the motifs in the Midrash on the Akedah, the most puzzling is the resurrection motif. Even a cursory reading of the Akedah story reveals that God did not allow Avraham to harm Yitzchak at all. In fact, the reader is informed from the very beginning that the divine command to sacrifice Yitzchak is only a test: "It was after those things, that the Elohim tested Avraham."⁶ Even though Yitzchak is not mentioned explicitly in the last verse, it is obvious that he is still alive. "Avraham returned to his lads; they arose; they went together to Be'er Sheva; Avraham dwelled in Be'er Sheva."⁷ Indeed, only Avraham is mentioned because he is the hero of the tale and the narrative focuses almost exclusively on his actions.⁸ Thus, it is more than a little strange that **there exists a Midrashic motif which seems to state that Yitzchak died on the altar, only to be resurrected!**

1) *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, ch. 31.

2) *Midrash HaGadol, Berayshit*, Mossad HaRav Kook: Jerusalem, vol. I, p. 355.

3) *Midrash VaYosha* appears in Adolph Jellinek, *Bayt HaMidrash*, reprinted by Wahrman: Jerusalem, 1967, vol. I, pp. 35-57. The quotation is from p. 38.

4) Rabbi Tzedki'yah HaRofay, *Shibbolay HaLeket*, Laws of the Shemonah Esray, ch. 18.

1) PIRKEI D'RABBI ELIEZER, CHAPTER 31:

This Midrash anthology, dating from the 7th century, was widely known throughout the ages and has been printed many, many times.

הכרובים שני מבין קולו שהשמיע כיון. **יצחק של נשמתו ויצאה פרתה**, צוארו על החרב שהגיע כיון: אמר יהודה ר' התורה מן המתים תחיית יצחק וידע. רגליו על ועמד והתירו. **לגופו הנפש חזרה**, "הנער אל ידך תשלה אל", ואמר, "המתים מחיה'ה אתה ברוך", ואמר פתח שעה באותו. להחיות עתידין המתים שכל Rabbi Yehudah said: Once the knife reached Yitzchak's throat, **his soul fled**. When God spoke from between the two Keruvim and said, "Do not raise your hand to the boy!" **the soul returned to his body**. He untied him and he stood on his feet, [then] Yitzchak knew that the resurrection of the dead was insured by the Torah, that in the future all the dead will be resurrected. Then he opened up and said, "Blessed are You, God, Who resurrects the dead."

The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah by Shalom Spiegel

Ryan Dulkan 2003 retelling of Midrash:

Both of his legs and his arms were bound tight. He appeared like an animal--a sheep ready for the slaughter. His father hovered above him. He could hear the muffled choking back of tears as his father reached for the cool blade. He witnessed the sword's arc as it swung up into the air, and with terrible fright watched the blade's descent. At the moment he felt the cool steal touch his neck, **his soul burst open and left his body**. Time froze as he witnessed his lifeless body bound on the altar. Suddenly, he heard a disembodied voice break forth from the heavens: "**Do not put out your hand toward the boy, do nothing to him.**" When he heard the Divine Injunction, **his soul returned to its body**. His limbs were no longer bound. He picked himself up from off the altar and stood on his own two feet. He was suddenly filled with a profound awareness--he would be a sign for future times; his resurrection was a portent, that in the future, the dead will be revived. In fear and trembling, Isaac uttered, "Blessed are you Adonai, Who Revives the Dead."

Is this a Jewish story? Isn't the story of "the binding of Isaac" about Abraham's test of faith?

Rabbi Judah chooses to read the story otherwise. For Rabbi Judah, the message of the story of the trial of Isaac is that, **just as our Father Isaac died and returned to life, so too will we.** Rabbi Judah teaches that the second berachah of the Amidah--the blessing praising God as the One Who Brings the Dead Back to Life--goes all the way back to the beginnings of the Jewish tradition.

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**Contrary to contemporary popular belief, resurrection is a central principle of our tradition. The first layer of rabbinic tradition--the Mishnah--numbers the belief in the resurrection of the dead as one of the most fundamental doctrines of Judaism.** The rabbis do not have to look to far to find resurrection, the only need to read the prophets for explicit instances of the bringing back to life from the realm of the dead, most notably in the stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

**I do not mean to say that resurrection isn't a profoundly challenging belief for us. Some of the liberal traditions of Judaism are so uncomfortable with the concept of the "revival of the dead" that they have excised any mention of it from the siddur.**