

Do you know what a *mechayeh* means in Yiddish? Here's an example. Someone recently told me that the week or so before Yom Kippur she slows down on drinking coffee, refraining from it completely a few days before the long day of fasting. "One of the sweetest things in my year," she said, is the morning *after* Yom Kippur and my first coffee in days. What a *mechayeh*!" Going on a 15-mile hike, getting to sit down at the end and then taking off your shoes and socks. That's a *mechayeh*! After working outside on a sweltering summer day, the chance to take a dip in a pool or sit in an air-conditioned room is a *mechayeh*. Sitting in a room when a beautiful breeze blows through or following a great massage you may well say, "What a *mechayeh*."

In Yiddish usage, then, a *mechayeh* implies anything that restores, refreshes, or revitalizes. The derivation of the word is from the Hebrew word **חַי** *chai* (literally "life" as in **לַחַיִּים** *l'chaim* – "to life"). The same spelling of the word in Hebrew (**מַחִיָּה**), however, is emphasized and pronounced slightly differently – in Yiddish as *meCHAYeh*, but in Hebrew as *mechaYEH*. There is a lot more to this than simply "po-tay-to – po-tah-to", for the word in Hebrew is bound to a spiritual and theological understanding of that which brings back to life what has died.

Three times a day – and on Yom Kippur *five* times – it is traditional to say a prayer that speaks of God's power as the **מַחִיָּה מֵתִים** *mechayeh ha'meitim*, the one who restores life to the dead, that is, resurrecting the dead. You may be surprised to learn that this emphasis on resurrection (called **תְּחִיַּת מֵתִים** *t'chiyat ha'meitim*) is an ancient Jewish belief. Over the past 200 years most Reform Jewish thinkers rejected the idea of resurrection. Thus, in Reform prayer books all reference to **תְּחִיַּת מֵתִים** has been expunged. In its place, until recently, the reference to God's power was expanded to **מַחִיָּה הַכֹּל** "bringing life to *all* (things)."

A decade and a half ago, however, the rabbis who edited our Reform prayer books changed the prayer about God's power to include *both* the Reform wording and the traditional one. If you listen carefully during our prayers, in fact, you will hear a difference in how your clergy say this prayer – most using the

version מחיה הכל "bring life to all", with me using the classic wording that God's power is to מחיה מתים "restore life to the dead."

Although I was raised with the normative Reform version, I changed my mind over the years because I came to believe that one, it distances us from the resurrecting power of life that is all around us; two, it alludes to the broader way we can understand resurrection; and three, expunging the traditional words misses the majestic poetry of prayer – and the possibility of each pray-er understanding the traditional wording in a way that is personally meaningful.

Resurrection all around us

One of the things I love about gardening is how often I am surprised by plants that I think are dead come back to life. Late each growing season I bring potted plants into our garage or basement. Every Spring I look at the dried up, brown sticks in the pots and say to myself, "Well, *that* didn't survive the winter." Since gardeners always hope, however, I bring the pots out into the warm April sun. Invariably, a few weeks later there is many a plant as beautiful as the summer before.

That's nothing. A few years ago, a doctor in Israel, Dr. Sarah Sallon, was reading about a medicinal plant called the Judean date palm in the works of the first century CE writings of Pliny and Josephus. This palm species died out centuries ago. Dr. Sallon realized, however, that a few of the seeds from those extinct date palms had been recently excavated in archaeological digs. Convincing the archeologists to give her some of the 2000-year-old seeds, she planted them. One grew, but it wasn't enough, as it was a male tree. Since palm trees need a male and female tree to bear fruit, it took many years to grow enough female trees to have any possibility of pollination. As of just three months ago, the first Judean date palm in centuries was bearing fruit.¹

¹ Schuster, Ruth (May 2, 2021). "[Scientists Resurrect Mysterious Judean Date Palms From Biblical Era](#)". Haaretz.

If that is not **תחיית מתים** I don't know what is. In the flowers that appear after a rain in the desert, in the brown grass that turns green each Spring, the world around us shows us that what seems dead may not be. Of course, you may debate, that's not really "resurrection" because the plant still alive. But that underplays the wider understanding of this concept, which leads me to my second point.

Not Just Resurrection – A Sense of Life Restored

In traditional Judaism we say the blessing **ברוך אתה ה' מחיה המתים** *Baruch Ata Adonai mechayeh ha'metim*. "Praised are You, Adonai, who restores life" after not seeing a dear friend or loved one for a year. After this past year of isolation and separation, how moving and powerful is that! Sure, I've seen plenty of you online – or, in more cases, you've seen me, but how amazing it has been during these holy days to see so many of you in 3D! This pandemic has reminded us how much we need human connection. When I first hugged our children or grandson after weeks, if not months, or separation, I cried. Recall how sweet it was the first time after after you were vaccinated when you could be back with friends - even if it was outside, even if masked. Hugs have rarely felt more sustaining and life-giving than they have this past year. How many of you have a friend we have not seen in a long time, maybe years, perhaps even decades, and when you get back together it's like no time passed at all? You just pick up where you left off. To be with someone we care about after a long absence does feel like a rebirth, a resurrection of what we so deeply missed.

A prayer in our *machzor* expands on this understanding of **תחיית מתים**:

When hope fills the spirit of one who despaired—say:

"Praise the Power that gives life to the dead."

When the hearts of the parents turn to the children

and the hearts of the children turn to the parents—say:

"Praise the Power that gives life to the dead."

When the prisoner is freed
and the sick one is healed—say:

“Praise the Power that gives life to the dead.”

When asking forgiveness and the other forgives—say:

“Praise the Power that gives life to the dead.”

When words of Torah unlock the heart
and open the eyes—say:

“Praise the Power that gives life to the dead.”

When evil is stopped and goodness prevails—say:

“Praise the Power that gives life to the dead.”

If the generations before us could expand the understanding of **מחיה המתים** surely we can, too. Let us not be stuck in too narrow an understanding of resurrection, but see it as an allusion to the power to make each day a *mechayeh*.

Prayer is not just philosophy, but poetry

Perhaps the most important reason to say the traditional **מחיה המתים** is out of my conviction that prayer is not always meant to engage the mind, but the heart. Prayer is not just an expression of what we believe and think. It is our voiced anguish for losing a loved one or anger at life's unfairness. Prayer confronts us with our mortality and inspires us with hope in the face of our fear. Prayer allows our memories to become more vivid, our recollections to inspire us. Prayer should steel us to face life's losses and disappointments. Our prayers should be poems – not always easy to understand, not fully making sense, but ever and always helping us feel.

At *yizkor*, maybe more than at any other time, the communal boundary between life and death is thin. On the one hand, on this day our own deaths feel very close. We do not eat or drink. We tremble when we say we are “like a flower that fades, a shadow moving on, a cloud passing by, dust on the wind, a dream that flies away.” The wearing of white parallels the shrouds in which we are traditionally buried. On the other hand, as we remember most precious parts of those we love who died, something of them comes back to life. The months or

years disappear – and we are back with them, as they are with us. And in so doing, we take heart that something of us, too, will live on.

In our weekly *Havurah* service we do not recite a list of names of those who died in recent days or whose *yahrzeit* is that week. Instead, anyone present says the names of those they remember and then share brief memories. Week after week I am moved by those who speak about those who died just a few days or weeks before, but most who died many years, if not decades ago. As they speak, their beloved dead come back to life. More than any gravestone, these living memories reflect how God plants within us the power of תחיית המתים “bringing life to the dead.”

To conclude, life finds a way to be renewed, day by day. In every living thing. In each breath we take. More than this, we can reconnect to those we care about and find new life. We can bring life to our dreams. We can find forgiveness, and through that be, in a very real way, reborn. And, finally, we can, at this sacred moment of *yizkor*, allow our memories to well up, to overflow and become our tears.

Those gathered to their kin before us are gone, but through memory they are resurrected. They are here [point to heart]. They are here [hands opened wide].

ברוך אתה ה' מחיה המתים *Baruch Ata Adonai mechayeh ha'meteim*. “Praised are You, Adonai, who restores life.”

My thanks to Rabbi Jonathan Blake for inspiring ideas in this sermon.