

The Resurrection of the Dead

Evidence in Tanach

In this week's Torah portion, *Haazinu*, Moses delivers a song exhorting Israel to remember the Exodus and follow the Torah or incur punishment, and a promise of future redemption. He quotes God as saying:

רְאוּ י עֲמָהּ כִּי אֲנִי הוּא וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי אֲנִי אֶמֶת וְאֶחָדָה מְחַצְתִּי וְאֲנִי אֶרְפָּא וְאֵין מְדַי מְצִיל:

See, now, that I, even I, am He. There is no god beside Me. I kill and I give life. I have wounded and I will heal. And there is none who can deliver out of My hand.
[Deut. 32:39]

Talmud: A physical revival after death is implied: God first says “I kill,” then “I give life”, which is not the sequence of events we witness (especially given “wound” and “heal” are in the proper sequence):

The Sages taught: [God said] “I kill and I give life.” One might have thought that this refers to death for one person and life [meaning birth], for another person, in the typical manner the world operates. [However,] the verse adds: “I have wounded and I will heal.” Just as the wounding and the healing [clearly] refer to the same person, so too death and life refer to the same person. This verse refutes those who say that there is no Torah source for the resurrection of the dead. [Pesachim 68a; also Sanhedrin 91b]

What happens after life is not revealed in Torah itself. The dead go to “Sheol”, a mysterious, ill-defined place. This leaves room for a wide variety of theories.

In rest of Tanach, more explicit hints at resurrection. Hannah, Samuel's mother, in her prayer of thanksgiving, uses the same language as our portion:

יְהוָה מֵמִית וּמְחַיֶּה מוֹרִיד מַצְלֵחַ וְשׂוֹלֵן בְּיָעַל:

The Lord gives death and gives life; casts down into Sheol and raises up.
[1Samuel 2:6]

Isaiah tells God:

Oh, let Your dead revive! Let corpses arise!

Awake and shout for joy, you who dwell in the dust! [Isaiah 26:19]

In addition, there are three specific examples of resurrection in Tanach:

-Elijah prays and God resurrects a young boy.

After a while, the son of the mistress of the house fell sick, and his illness grew worse, until he had no breath left in him. She said to Elijah, "What harm have I done to you, O man of God, that you should come here to recall my sin and cause the death of my son?"

"Give me the boy," he said to her; and taking him from her arms, he carried him to the upper chamber where he was staying, and laid him down on his own bed. He cried out to the Lord and said, "O Lord my God, will You bring calamity upon this widow whose guest I am, and let her son die?" Then he stretched out over the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, saying, "O Lord my God, let this child's life return to his body!"

The Lord heard Elijah's plea. The child's life returned to his body, and he revived. Elijah picked up the child and brought him down from the upper room into the main room, and gave him to his mother. "See," said Elijah, "your son is alive." And the woman answered Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord is truly in your mouth." [1Kings 17:17–24]

-Elisha revives the son of the Shunammite woman, a child whose birth he had foretold. [2 Kings 4:8–16]

Elisha came into the house, and there was the boy, laid out dead on his couch. He went in, shut the door behind the two of them, and prayed to the Lord. Then he mounted [the bed] and placed himself over the child. He put his mouth on its mouth, his eyes on its eyes, and his hands on its hands, as he bent over it. And the body of the child became warm. He stepped down, walked once up and down the room, then mounted and bent over him. Thereupon, the boy sneezed seven times, and opened his eyes.

[Elisha] called Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman," and he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Pick up your son." She came and fell at his feet and bowed low to the ground. Then she picked up her son and left.

[2Kings 4:32–37]

-A dead man thrown in Elisha's grave is revived when his body touches Elisha's bones:

Once a man was being buried, when the people caught sight of a band [of Moabite thugs], so they threw the corpse into Elisha's grave and made off. When the [dead] man came in contact with Elisha's bones, he came to life and stood up. [2Kings 13:21]

One can argue that these prophets knew how to revive someone who had just died, something modern surgeons frequently do. There is even a hint of cardiopulmonary and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

-The Talmud sees more proof in the tense of verbs: [Sanhedrin 91b]

-In Psalms, the first line of *Ashrei* says:

Ashrei yoshvei vetecha; 'Od yehallelucha selah [Ps. 84:5]

Happy are those who dwell in Your house! They shall praise You yet again.

The Sages asked: Why “They shall praise you yet again” instead of just “they praise you”? Because it alludes to the *future*, after resurrection, when they will praise God *again*! It means, “Just as they praised You in this world, so they shall praise You in the World to Come.”

-In Exodus, it says:

“Then Moses and the children of Israel will sing this song to the Lord.”

[Exodus 15:1] It is not stated “sang” but “will sing” [implying Moses will be revived and sing the song in the future.]

-In Joshua, it says:

“Then Joshua will build an altar to the Lord God of Israel on Mount Ebal.”

[Joshua 8:30] It is not stated “built” but “will build” [implying Joshua will be revived.]

Talmudic position

In Talmudic times, Sadducees and Samaritans rejected the notion of the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees defended it passionately, arguing it was part of the Oral Law. They won out, and now it is mainline Jewish teaching. All rabbis agreed on the existence of a “World to Come” (*Olam Ha-ba*), on the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead when the Messiah arrives (*tehiyyat hammetim*). These concepts are ubiquitous in Jewish thought and liturgy:

-The Mishnah says:

These are those who have no portion in the World to Come: He who maintains that resurrection is not a biblical doctrine, that the Torah was not divinely revealed, and an Epicurean [who encourages people to seek out only the pleasures of this world.] [Sanhedrin 10:1]

(This means, curiously, that if you don't believe in it, you won't get it. Does your belief cause its existence? Let's save that for another time.)

-The second of the nineteen blessings in the Amidah is simply:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה, מְחַיֶּה הַמֵּתִים

Baruch atta HaShem, mechayye ha-metim.

Blessed are You, O Lord, who revives the dead.

-The morning prayer, extracted from the Talmud [Berachot 60b], reads:

אֱלֹהֵי. נְשָמָה שְׁנַתַּת בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא. אַתָּה בְּרָאָתָהּ. אַתָּה יָצַרְתָּהּ. אַתָּה נִפְחָתָהּ בִּי. וְאַתָּה מְשַׁמְרָהּ
בְּקִרְבִּי. וְאַתָּה עֹתִיד לְטַלְהָ מִמֶּנִּי. וְלַחְזוֹרָהּ בִּי לְעֹתִיד לָבוֹא.

*Elokai neshama shenatata bi tehora hi, ata berata, ata ietzarta, ata nefachta bi,
ve-atta meshamra bekirbi, ve-atta 'atiod lit-la mimmeni, ul-hachavirah bi l'attid
lavo.*

My God, the soul that You gave me is pure. You created it, You fashioned it, You breathed it into me. You preserve it within me, and You will take it from me, but You will restore it to me hereafter.

-These beliefs are codified in Maimonides' "thirteen principles of faith". The 12th says that the Messiah will come and the 13th says that God grants eternal life:

(12) I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may delay, nevertheless I anticipate every day that he will come.

(13) I believe with perfect faith that there will be a resurrection of the dead at a time that will please the Creator, blessed and exalted be his Name forever and ever.

Process of resurrection

-The body will be rebuilt from the *luz* bone, a tiny but very tough bone in the spine. (Read: DNA.)

[The Roman Emperor] Hadrian... asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania: "From what part [of the body] will the Holy One, blessed be He, cause man to blossom forth in the future?"

He replied: "From the nut of the spinal column."

He asked: "How do you know that?"

He replied: "Bring me one and I will prove it to you."

He threw it into the fire, yet it was not burnt.

He put it in water, but it did not dissolve.
He ground it between millstones, but it was not crushed.
He placed it on an anvil and smote it with a hammer. The anvil was cleft and the hammer split, yet it remained intact. [Genesis R. 28:3]

-You will come back as you went:

As a man departs [this life] so will he be when he is resurrected. If he departs blind, he will return blind; if he departs deaf, he will return deaf; if he departs mute, he will return mute; if he departs lame, he will return lame; if he departs clothed, he will return clothed... God said, "Let them arise as they went, and afterwards I will heal them." [Genesis R. 95:1; also Sanhedrin 91b]

-Order of events:

-The Messiah comes, rebuilds the Temple in Jerusalem, and gathers all living Jews in the Land of Israel.

-Forty years later, the dead are resurrected, by descending order of righteousness.

-First the scholars who mostly studied Torah, then those who mostly followed mitzvot.

-First the dead of Israel, then the dead in the Diaspora. The latter will burrow through the earth until they reach Israel. (That's why many Jews want to be buried in Israel.)

-Following the bodily resurrection is a spiritual life in the World to Come.

The Talmud [Berakhot 17a] gives more details, summarized by Maimonides:

There are no bodies and no bodily forms in the World to Come... There is no eating or drinking there, nor is there anything which the human body needs in this world. Nor does there occur there any of the events which occur to the human body in this world, such as sitting, standing, sleep, death, distress, laughter, and so forth. The ancient sages say: "In the World to Come, there is no eating or drinking or procreation, but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads and bask in the radiance of the Divine Presence... There is no way for us in this world to know or comprehend the great goodness which the soul experiences in the world to come, for in this world we know only of material pleasures, and it is these we desire. [Rambam, Yad, Teshuvah 8]

Many Jewish writers likewise emphasize the spiritual nature of the afterlife.

Conclusion

While the belief in resurrection and an afterlife is deeply rooted in Judaism, the Jewish emphasis has always been on the "here and now". In the Torah, God tells us:

I have set before you life and death. Choose life! [Deut. 30:19]

Death is never depicted as something to look forward to, only a part of the divine plan. Death gives us the discipline to make the best use of our time on earth, because we know there will not always be a tomorrow.