

## "THE BELIEF IN RESSURECTION- A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH"

It is with a certain amount of trepidation that I enter the pulpit this morning to talk to you about our Jewish belief in Ressurrection - a matter of life and death. I say with "trepidation" because I am fully aware of the fact that to the sophisticated modern mind one of the most difficult religious concepts which it is asked to accept is that of ressurection. But this morning is especially appropriate to discuss this fundamental belief. \*It is appropriate because in the Piyutt we recited this morning we reaffirmed our faith in ressurection. \*It is appropriate because we are now congregating to memorialize the dead. \*It is appropriate because any of Maimonides' 13 Principles of Faith is always appropriate. And, my friends, if I cannot succeed in "selling" ressurection to you, I hope that I can at least succeed in explain it and its significance to you.

There are three significant questions which we should answer in a discussion of this sort. They are:

1. What is the significance of the belief in ressurection?
2. Why is the Jew inclined to this belief?
3. When will this phenomenon of ressurection take place?

If we can answer these three questions satisfactorially, then we might perhaps be inclined to accept this uniquely Jewish precept, or, at the very least, to treat it with sympathy, respect and solicitude.

1. What is the significance of this faith? The Jew has never been blind to the realities of life. He recognizes the patent fact that there is much evil in this world of ours. He makes no attempt to negate or overlook these evils, because he has so often had to bear the brunt of them. He knows the tragedy of illness: a diseased child, an ailing adolescent, a man in his prime ruined by a bad heart, a frame of a human being wasting away painfully because of a malignant growth, a family reduced to poverty because of their number has succumbed to a disease; He knows the evil called hunger: the emaciated form of a two-year old with bulging eyes and bloated stomach, the hunger which causes thousands of to rot in the melas of North Africa, the starvation which only a few years ago took its toll in the DP camps, the hunger which constantly threatens our brethren in our Homeland; He knows the wrong called persecution: the whips of Pharo's taskmasters, the cruelty of the Babylonians and Assyrians, the sadism of the Greeks and Romans, the Inquisitions of Spain, the Crusades of France, the barbarism of the Poles, the pogroms of the Russians, the crematoria of the Germans, the quick, silent arrests behind the Iron Curtain. ALL THESE the Jew knows well, only too well, these and every other form of tragedy which has been named and has yet to be named. Yet despite his first-hand knowledge of these great evils, the Jew has never succumbed to despair. For he has placed his faith in G-d - a faith that has been vindicated - a faith that G-d will, because of His ETHICAL CHARACTER, correct these wrongs, destroy and extirpate these evils. Our conception of G-d is not, as others have accused us of believing, that of an angry, vindictive G-d, nor a high-handed, disinterested G-d; G-d is good, He is ethical, and He therefore seeks to heal the sick, feed the hungry, redeem the oppressed.

What has all this to do with Ressurrection? Simply this, that all the evils which we have mentioned and which we could have mentioned are merely secondary in importance to the greatset evil of Life - the evil of Death. For Death is more than which uproots a loved one, snatches away a parent from a helpless child, or a baby from its mother. Death it is which is the logical ending to all other evils. Death is the natural result of disease, hunger and oppression. And so, Death is, to the Jew, the greatest and blackest of all evils. No wonder the Rabbis always insist that אנשיו ידו רעו an evil person is called dead. A perfect equation of death and evil.

And so, my friends, the ethical character of the Jew asserts itself. For the ethical person believes in an ethical G-d; and an ethical G-d will some day correct the greatest imperfection in Life, which is Death. The belief in Ressurrection, therefore, is the ultimate profession of faith by the most civilized and ethical of people.

You are no doubt acquainted with the story of Hannah. This woman was a crushed spirit - despondent, melancholy and gloomy. For her life's greatest wish was to bear a son, but she was barren. She came to the Temple to pray and she silently poured forth her deepest emotions before G-d. Eli, the High Priest, who thought at first that she was drunk - for "only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard" - then told her to return to her home, and that within the year G-d would bless her with a child. A year later she returned to the Temple, no longer bitter, for she now brought with her her son, the Prophet Samuel, and she offered a prayer so profound, so moving, so eloquent, that our Sages patterned our Shmoneh Esreh prayer after her prayer. And in this mood of happiness and exultation, this woman who had once been barren recited the praises of the Living G-d saying:

וְיִשְׁמַחַן בְּיָמֵינוּ וְיִשְׁמַחַן בְּיָמֵינוּ וְיִשְׁמַחַן בְּיָמֵינוּ וְיִשְׁמַחַן בְּיָמֵינוּ

וְיִשְׁמַחַן בְּיָמֵינוּ וְיִשְׁמַחַן בְּיָמֵינוּ וְיִשְׁמַחַן בְּיָמֵינוּ וְיִשְׁמַחַן בְּיָמֵינוּ

"...they that stumbled are girded with strength...they that were hungry have ceased, while the barren hath born seven...the Lord killeth and maketh alive again, He bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up again; He maketh poor and maketh rich; He bringeth low and lifteth up; He raiseth the poor out of the dust...to make them sit with princes..." So then, this woman Hannah that just as G-d blesses the barren, feeds the hungry, helps the poor and rescues the downtrodden, so does He quicken the dead and ressurect them. All these beliefs are part of the same ethical fabric, and they represent the vanguard of the civilized spirit.

2. Our second question was: Why is the Jew inclined to accept the idea of ressurection? And the answer is, primarily because he is an incorrigible optimist. It is because the Jew cannot understand tragedy. A person who can understand tragedy must learn to accept it; he who learns to accept becomes a pessimist; and a pessimist can never survive these great upheavals. Consider all those gigantic, diastrophic forces which have opposed the Jew and threatened to destroy him since Time Immemorial. The Pharos, the Golden Calves, the Tituses, the Crusaders, the Fascists, the exiles and anti-semites of all forms and shapes. Without a super-human optimism - one might almost say a sense of humor - it would have been almost impossible to survive these manifold evils. And what is true for the national life of the Jew is true for the individual Israelite. He is an inveterate optimist, a man whose voice can rise in song though his cheeks be warm with tears. The Jew cannot accept Death as final, and therefore he inclines to seek for a time when life will be renewed again. To the Jew, any belief that Death is absolutely final is a morbid thought. The Jew is sanguine and optimistic, and it is that, and courage - not fear - which give him his belief in Techiyas Ha'meyssin.

The Talmud relates an interesting legend in connection with Ezekiel's famous "Vision of Dry Bones". The Prophet was lead into a valley, by G-d, and in a vision he was shown the remains of human beings scattered over a bleak valley, - thousands of skulls, bones, fragments of skeletons. And in this great vision, Ezekiel prophesies to these bones and, behold, flesh and veins and skin begin to cover them. And soon Ezekiel has, in the vision, ressurected the dead. That is as far as the Biblical narrative takes us. But the Rabbis, in their uniquely symbolic language, add something of real interest. They say: וְיִשְׁמַחַן בְּיָמֵינוּ וְיִשְׁמַחַן בְּיָמֵינוּ וְיִשְׁמַחַן בְּיָמֵינוּ וְיִשְׁמַחַן בְּיָמֵינוּ. The dead who were ressurected by Ezekiel began to ... sing! You see, my friends, this is not only a song which comes from the lips of the ressurected, it is the spirit of song which moves the living here-and-now to believe in Ressurrection.

3. The third point we must discuss is "when". When will the ressurection be effected by the Almighty. It would be presumptuous as well as ridiculous for me to set a specific date for the ressurection. Even our Patriarchs couldn't do that. All that is revealed to us is that this great event will take place בְּיָמֵינוּ, in the end of days. Jewish thought is strong on that point - that the physical ressurection of the dead is a matter of the distant future, not the here-and-now.

But while ressurection is a physical phenomenon, the rebuilding of the body, must be relegated to a much later time, ressurection in a modified form is a pressing and urgent matter of the present. Ressurrection is indeed a daily occurrence, though we often fail to see it, as we frequently are unaware of the most obvious things. Once made aware of it, however, most of us will

readily acknowledge the fact that the dead and the near-dead can come to life again.

③ Let the medical doctors draw from their many experiences and testify to the fact patients often given up as incurable miraculously return to health. Many a doctor has declared a case hopeless only to have the greatest doctor of them all - ה' - reverse his decision. Many of us laymen have witnessed dear ones snatched from the jaws of death and returned to the Land of Life. We have seen people, stricken with afflictions which can kill the spirit of man, who have beaten these afflictions by a resolute will. No better example need be given than the man whose Yahrzeit we celebrated only recently, Pres. Roosevelt. Paralysis should certainly have choked that man's initiative and destroyed his spirit, as it has done to countless others. Yet he returned from this death-in-life and, on the contrary, drew strength, infinite strength, from it. ה' - G-d kills - but He resurrects too.

④ Let the business man stand and be counted. How often have seen a man dubbed as "washed out". Insolvency, failure, bankruptcy - the great fear of economic extinction, economic death. How many a business man has been completely ruined, destroyed - only to come back again by an act of G-d, though this form of resurrection is usually attributed to "chance", "luck" or "know-how". ה' - G-d leads down to the bottomless pit of ruination, but He brings up again.

⑤ Let the lawyers relate their experiences of cases almost hopeless from the very beginning, their clients caught in a maelstrom of convincing evidence of guilt, until a solitary witness, a single argument, the merest bit of evidence convinces a jury or judge to the contrary. ה' - G-d, the great King and Judge, who can lead up to the gallows - and then resurrect.

⑥ Let the Nature Lovers, inspired by the oncoming of the Spring, tell of the greatness of G-d's resurrection of Nature. Brown lawns turn green, bare trees dress in the gay colors of Spring, and Death is vanquished by Growth. ה' - G-d makes salvation grow again.

⑦ Let all of us to whom the Land of Israel is dear, sing the truth of resurrection. A land lies fallow for 20 long centuries; its people driven from exile to interminable exile for 2000 terrible years. A people doomed as "decadent" by the Nietzsche and "fossilized" by the Toynbees. And yet G-d resurrects such a people, He returns the Land to the People and the People to the Land. ה' - G-d keeps His promise to those who lie in the dust and dirt and grime of exile for 20 hundred years.

⑧ And, finally, let the Rabbi testify - the Rabbi who sees people drifting in and out of the synagogue and completely unaffected by it; people plagued by meaninglessness, boredom, aimlessness; people who suffer from an emptiness of the spirit; people who wander in life, looking vainly for something to cling to, like a derelict ship lost at sea, riding the chopping waves aimlessly, looking for some port on the endless horizon; people who are, by their own acknowledgment, dead in spirit. Yet any Rabbi will tell you that such a person will sometimes "drift" into a synagogue - for an occasional Yizkor or for a Kaddish. And this visit - so accidental, so incidental - will ignite a spark in some people, a spark which grows into a conflagration, a flame or fire provides new standards, higher meaning and solid purposes and goals for a man. And he leaves that shul, not empty and derelict, but firm in a new conviction, determined to reorient his entire life. He forms new associations with his people; he resolves to live in, not just visit, that shul. He begins to appreciate and practice the Sabbath, to educate himself Jewishly, and to further the education of his and other's children. A new man now emerges, a man who is living, not dead. It is the miracle of resurrection. ה' - Blessed art Thou who resurrects the dead.

One of the Rabbis of the Mishna, Rabbi Simai, once said: ה' - There is no chapter in the Bible which does not contain some reference or hint to resurrection.

Only we do not have the ability to interpret these verses properly in order to discover those hints. There is no day that passes, What this Rabbi said about the Bible can well be said of all of Life. There is no day that passes, no leaf that is turned in the Book of Life; there is no event, great or small, which does not bespeak the miracle of Resur'n - only it is we who have lost the fine faculty of observation, the superior skill of seeing and detecting what is to be seen. All we need do is open our eyes to what is before us and we shall find the shadow of res'n fluttering in the here-and-now, in the present, in every event of our lives.

The "what" is - ethical. The "why" is - optimism. The "when" is - even right now. We can see, if we will but will, for we know that the miracle of rebirth is no less wonderful than the miracle of birth.