

"The Meaning of Ressurrection"  
Ninth in a Series on Jewish Meanings

A Matter of Life and Death

A-65

It is with a certain amount of trepidation that I enter the pulpit this morning to talk to you about the Jewish <sup>Meaning</sup> of Ressurrection - a matter of life and death. I say with "trepidation" because I am fully aware of the fact that the sophisticated modern mind finds it difficult to accept the religious concept of Techiyas Ha'meissim, or the ressurection of the dead. But this morning is especially appropriate for a discussion of this sort. It is appropriate because our Rabbis saw profuse references to Ressurrection in <sup>the</sup> today's Bible Reading of <sup>Passover</sup> the Song of Moses. It is appropriate because we are preparing for a mass participation in Yizkor Services tomorrow - a mass demonstration of such magnitude that, whether one approves of it or not, requires some clarification as to the role of Life and Death in Judaism. And, finally, it is appropriate because any of Maimonide's 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 explaining it and its significance to you.

There are three important questions which I should like to answer in the course of this talk: First, WHY is the Jew so inclined to the belief in Ressurrection? Secondly, HOW does Ressurrection take place? And thirdly, WHEN will it happen? If we can answer these questions satisfactorily, then we might perhaps be inclined to accept this uniquely Jewish precept in both its eternal and contemporary manifestations or, at the very least, treat it with sympathy, respect and solicitude.

Our first question was: WHY is the Jew receptive to this belief in Ressurrection? And the answer is, primarily, because he is an incorrigible optimist. A great gentile writer once said that the Jew has never been able to understand tragedy. Rightly so! For he who understands Tragedy, Death, Suffering, learns to accept it as inevitable; and he who thus accepts it becomes a pessimist. It is one thing to learn to live with "tsarus" temporarily - that may be done by the optimist; but it is something quite different to learn to like them as lifelong companions - that is the mark of the pessimist. And a pessimist can never really survive the great crises in life. The Jew has always been the optimist, not the pessimist, and has therefore survived the worst tragedies any people has ever experienced. Consider all those gigantic forces that have threatened the Jew with extinction since Time Immemorial - the Pharos,

the Hamans, the Tituses, the Crusaders, the Nazis, the Fascists, the Communists, the anti-semites of all forms and shades. Without a superhuman optimism - one might almost say a sense of humor - the Jew could never have survived these many evils. The Jew is man whose voice can rise in song though his cheeks be wet with tears. He cannot accept Death as final, and therefore he seeks for a time when Life will be renewed. To the Jew, any belief that Death is absolutely final is a morbid thought. He is sanguine and optimistic, and it is that, and courage - not fear - which gives him his belief in Techiyas Ha'meissim.

The Talmud relates an interesting legend in connection with Ezekiel's famous "Vision of the Dry Bones". The Prophet was led into a Valley, by G-d, and in a vision he was shown the remains of human beings scattered over the bleak valley - thousands of bones, skulls and 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 the Prophet has 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: MEISSIM SHE'HECHEYAH YECHEZKE' EL AMRU SHIRAH, 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, but it is the spirit of song - optimism - which moves the living in the here-and-now to believe in Ressurrection. It was the optimist in the Jew - his spirit of SHIRAH - which said ALOH NA'ALEH VE'YARASHNU OSSAH, we shall conquer Canaan despite her giants. It was the optimism of a Mordecai singing REVACH VE'HATZALAH YAAMOD LAYEHUDIM MI'MAKOM ACHER which felled a Haman. It was the singing spirit of optimism which led our exiled people to ressurect our National Home against the armed might of 7 Arab States and England. If that same spirit of optimism, of belief in Deathlessness and Eternal Life, could move us, we would never shake our heads gloomily and sigh "Nebech" No, when asked if Judaism has a chance on this continent. We would never smile forbearingly at attempts to build a solid Jewish educational system even in the heart of the business world. We would work and work hard to ressurect the minima of Judaism. For Pessimism is Life in a Coma; and Optimism is Life surging, through Death, to Rebirth. And that Optimism is the reason for our belief in Ressurrection.

The second question which we have undertaken to answer is: HOW will ressurection be accomplished. That is indeed a formidable question. With all the scientific information which we have amassed today, no one can claim to be able to create or actually ressurect a human being. And yet our Rabbis did tell us how this Techiyas Ha'meissim will occur. By analyzing the same Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones which we just mentioned, they maintain (that the Creation of Man, birth, begins with OR UBASSAR and ends with GIDDIM VA'ATZAMOS, that G-d first provides the embryo with flesh and skin, and later gives him blood vessels and bones. But when G-d will ressurect mankind, they say, the order will be reversed: first GIDDIM VA'ATZAMOS, veins and bones, and then OR UBASSAR, flesh and skin. A curious commentary, indeed, and one wonders why the Rabbis spent time and energy delving into things so distant and beholden.)

But as a matter of fact, the words of the Sages have much deeper meaning than appears at first sight, and the significance of their message is contemporary, for the present, as well as mystical and for the distant future. For Ressurrection is a concept which is broad indeed, and includes more than the physical rejuvenation of dead bodies some time in the great future. It means, in this broader sense, a "second chance". It is the promise that people will get a second chance at things, an opportunity to right what was wronged. And this Second Chance, what in Baseball's metaphor is known as a Second Wind, is a matter of everyday occurrence. A young student fails miserably on an examination. His school gives him a "re-exam". It is his Second Chance, his Ressurrection - if he can succeed and pass it. A man and his wife have made a mess of their married life for a good number of years. Under the guidance of their Rabbi or Minister or Psychologist they decide to "give it another try". Here is their Second Chance, an opportunity to ressurect the dying embers of an early love and affectionate companionship. A man has proved a failure as a citizen and has been arrested. He is soon released on parole and given a Second Chance. Ressurrection again - if he can live up to the Parole Board's expectations.

But how is a man to go about this Ressurrection in the here-and-now? How is he to successfully revive his life in his Second Chance? <sup>Yet</sup> Here the Rabbis' description of Ressurrection tells us much. In your first attempts, they want to say, in your First

Chance at Life, the one in which you made your share of human errors and perhaps failed, and which you hope to correct with this "Second Chance" Ressurrection", your first interest was OR UBASSAR, the skin and the flesh - that is, the outside, the superficial, the seemingly attractive. You were attracted by color and flash and splendor. It was the exterior of things which attracted and fascinated you. Life was only skin deep. OR UBASSAR. Only too late did you discover that the substance of man is not his exterior. Only too late did you discover that it is a man's blood that counts - and even more, his ATZAMOS, his back-bone, his resistance, his inner self, that which is not overly glamorous, but upon which depends his whole being. Now, in this Second Chance which you are granted, the ressurection can be complete and successful only if you reverse that order. Start, this time, with the GIDDIM VA'ATZAMOS. Concentrate on the inner matter, think deeper and go to the core of life. Interest yourself in the soul which G-d gave you - KI HA'DAM HU HA'NEFESH, blood represents the soul. Develop your inner faculties of faith and goodness and sincerity and decency, and build yourself ATZAMOS, a back-bone, the power to resist temptation, the strength to swim upstream, the ability to speak but even for the unpopular. And then, when a man has proven that he has a back-bone and red blood, when he has made himself GIDDIM VA'ATZAMOS, will he automatically have obtained the OR UBASSAR, flesh and skin, the glamour and glisten and glow of the external which reflects a substantial inside. Only thus, our Rabbis insist, can Ressurrection - the Second Chance - be a success. For G-d ressurects thus too.

Winston Churchill is perhaps the best example of a man who so proceeded when he was given his Second Chance. In his latest biography, by Robert Lewis Taylor, we read of young Churchill at the sociable Harrow School which was and is world famous. It was his first chance at proving his real worth. But somehow the OR UBASSAR had a supernatural attraction for him. He could not resist the glamour of pushing a fellow student into the swimming pool, the attraction of loudly yawning in an extremely "dignified" church, or the dubious humor of immediately buying two dogs upon learning that it was forbidden to own any at all. He childishly and immaturely strove for a dazzling exterior and cared nothing at all for essentials. He failed more examinations and was refused by more good schools than probably any other great man. He was

graduated last in his class in Harrow, after being "left back" a number of times. Some years later, his father, Lord Randolph, confided to a friend that he urged Winston to join the Army because he considered his son a little retarded and didn't think he would succeed at anything else. It took Churchill a long time to discover that all was not glint and shine, OR UBASSAR. When, however, he was accepted at the famous military school of Sandhurst, Churchill changed. No longer were his pranks the major topics of discussion. He withdrew into his own room and self, concentrated on the serious problems of Life and Living, got himself an education even if he didn't like it, and developed his famous character. Now he was ressurecting himself. He began with GIDDIM VA'ATZAMOS, veins and bones; he became a red-blooded person and studiously built his famous back-bone, a back-bone which was to hold firm in the face of Hitlers and Stalins. Sufficient elan and splendour, OR UBASSAR, surround this colorful leader today. But only because, when he got his Second Chance, he followed the right order for Ressurrection - GIDDIM VA'ATZAMOS first.

The same holds true for institutions and nations, of course. A synagogue may undertake a project and fail. Upon examination of the futile First Chance, it may be discovered that oo much attention was paid the Skin, not enough to the Backbone. The way to a successful Ressurrection, a prosperous Second Chance, is clear enough - GIDDIM VA'ATZAMOS. A State of Israel, despite all her great accomplishments in the first five years of her life, may still be considered wanting in the matter of GIDDIM VA'ATZAMOS. For after the glamour of playing at the game of international diplomacy, after the heart-warming fact of a Jewish Ambassador in Washington, after the beautiful OR UBASSAR, what about the GIDDIM VA'ATZAMOS? Is that soul-sustaining blood circulating freely in Israel, or has perhaps Regligion been neglected just a bit in Israel? Can the Prime Minister, despite his own well-known religious leanings, perhaps show a bit more ATZAMOS, back-bone, in dealing with the atheistic left-wing? One hopes that the next five years will show a Ressurrection of religious feeling in Israel, a Second Chance beginning with GIDDIM VA'ATZAMOS.

The answer to our second question, then, is that R<sup>e</sup>ssurrection - both the future one and the one disguised as the "Second Chance" - begins with matters of the heart and the soul, and only then proceeds to the externals of flesh and skin.



Our third and final question was: WHEN. Of course, it would be presumptuous for me to set a date for physical ressurection. Even Jacob couldn't predict the ACHARIS HA'YAMIM. But in a modified form, as we have already indicated, Ressurrection is indeed a daily occurence though we often fail to see it, as we frequently are unaware of the most obvious things. And once made aware of it, most of us will readily acknowledge that the dead and the near-dead can come to life again.

\*Let the medical doctors draw from their many experiences and testify to the fact that 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 - ANI HA'SHEM ROFECHA - reverse his decision. Many of us laymen have witnessed dear ones snatched from the jaws of death and returned to the Land of Life. HA'SHEM MEIMIS U'MECHAYEH- G-d kills, but He ressurects, too.

\*Let the business man stand and be counted. How often have we seen a man dubbed as a "washout". Insolvency, failure, bankruptcy - the great fear of economic extinction and financial death. How many a merchant has been completely ruined, destroyed - only to come back again by an act of G-d, though this form of ressurection is generally attributed to "chance", "luck" or "know-how". MORID SHE'OL VA'YAIL - G-d leads down to the bottomless pit of economic ruin, but He brings up again.

\*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, a shred of evidence, convinces a judge or jury of the contrary. MELECH MEIMIS UMECHAYEH- G-d, the Great King And Judge who can lead to the gallows - and then ressurect. Blessed be G-d who ressurects. ]

→ add: ISRAEL MIRININ; RABBI SIMAI (NR)

One of the Rabbis of the Mishna, Rabbi Simai, once said: EIN LCHA PARSHA BHAL HA'TORAH SHE'AIN RAH TEXHIYAS HA'MEISSIM, ELA SHE'EIN BANU KO'ACH LIDROSH. There is no chapter in the Bible which does not contain some reference or hint to ressurection. Only we do not have the insight to interpret these verses properly in order to discover those hints. What this Rabbi said of the Bible can be said of all Life. There is no day that passes, no leaf that is turned in the Book of Life; there is no event, large or small, which does not bespeak the Miracle of Ressurrection - only it is we who have lost the fine faculty of observation, the superior skill of seeing and detecting what

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is to be seen. All we need do is open our eyes to what is before us and we shall find the shadow of rassionation fluttering in the here-and-now, in the present, in every event of our lives.

The "WHY" is - optimism. The "HOW" is - by strength of soul and spirit first. The "WHEN" is - even right now. We can see, if we will but will, for we know that the miracle of rebirth is no more wonderful than the miracle of birth.