

Resurrection

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Western entertainment seems massively preoccupied with dead bodies coming back to life. Popular horror films and television series regurgitate this very weird fixation. And there's Halloween. Parallel with this is the increasing belief of many scientists that we are on the threshold of immortality. Modern medical science will enable us to live forever. We will never have to confront death. My rational self is just amazed, both by the ridiculous and the unknown.

During this time of the year we are reminded of a range of theological ideas that if taken literally, do not make sense. In most major religions, resurrection in all its wondrous, fabled manifestations plays a crucial part. Whether it is fear of death and the need to be reassured at times of loss, or the belief that the good are rewarded and the bad are punished. The ancient world believed in it. Think of the Pyramids. Christianity is predicated on it. This particular idea keeps on popping up. What are we to make of it?

In Judaism's most repeated liturgy, the Amidah, "God, who enables the dead to live" is repeated at least three times a day, every day of the year. Yet no one throughout our history has successfully defined what it actually means. Perhaps it is no more than Elijah's reviving an apparently dead child. Maimonides, writing about the tradition of the Messiah, but including the After Life and Resurrection, says, "All these ideas, no one knows how they will play out until they happen. This was something that was hidden even from the prophets...That is why there is so much disagreement." (Laws of Kings 12:2)

The Talmud is mystified too: "Cleopatra the queen asked Rebbi Meir, 'I can understand that dead people can be brought back to life, but will I come back with my clothes on or without them?'" No fashionista like Cleopatra would want to be brought back to life wearing clothes that were out of fashion. If it was meant literally, then of course we might wonder about the details. Do we come back as adults or babies? With plastic surgery, false teeth or limbs? Given that our bodies are constantly changing, growing, and decaying, at what stage of life? Or will we just rise from our graves as we were when buried? And what about all those thousands and millions of faithful Jews who were burnt to a cinder?

The Talmud, is divided. There are those who see resurrection as a national state, as the Prophet Ezekiel does, a nation reborn. Some rabbis said and resurrection was a "mashal", a metaphor, a message that there is always hope and one should never give up hope—for cures, for rain, for life. Others say it means some miraculous intervention, an affirmation that there are forces, a force, in this world beyond our science and beyond our comprehension. Some people simply take it at face value and ask no questions. But that can be dangerous, particularly if you are a teacher.

Last week I was having a discussion with some young members of my community who went to a very good Jewish school in the USA. They raised the question of organ donations and told me that in their school the Jewish studies teachers told them that it was against Jewish law. Their teacher had said that when it comes to resurrection, bodies come back to life as they were at the moment of death, and if one was missing a crucial organ one would be resurrected without it. I asked them if they really thought that all those great rabbis and martyred Jews who had been burnt at the stake or incinerated would be denied resurrection. This, coming from an institution which prides itself on its high secular and religious standards. I then realized why I had heard that so many of its alumni were abandoning Orthodoxy.

I was so flabbergasted that I approached the rabbi of the school and asked him whether this was school policy or just one rogue (stupid/naïve) teacher. He promptly took out his US Organ donor card. I took out mine from the HODS the Halachic Organ Donor Society. He said he thought it important that we Jews be seen contributing to the pool of organs that we ourselves might need to benefit from. He said that it must have been a teacher in the much lower grades who would have said such a thing. We Jews come in all shades—the simple and the brilliant, the rational and the mystical. We are bombarded with different and conflicting narratives by rabbis who range from the brilliant to the stupid. But if we are mature adults we will listen, learn and make up our own minds.

Resurrection does not make rational sense. I often think of walking down High Street, World To Come and bumping into my late father. But I know it's a fantasy. How often do you hear it said that "your mother is looking down on you from Heaven", as if she has eyes and a private space machine to follow you around.

Do our bodies come back with tooth veneers or rhinoplasty? Are we expected to understand these ideas the way they did then? Or should we try to make them relevant to us now? Do we simply accept age old theologies because we have to or because they can inspire us? If the most committed of us can agree that obligations in the Bible to destroy Canaanites no longer apply, or that if many of the punishments the Torah mentions were never expected to be carried out, can't we say the same of ideas?

For me personally, Yom Kipur is a day of resurrection. It is a day when I descend to the depths of despair at the realization of my failures, mistakes, and inadequacies. I read the lists of all the possible errors the liturgy names. I wonder whether I deserve to live another year or why I was allowed to outlive my father by so much. This is a necessary, cathartic, and healthy process. It purges one's black side. Though I approach the valley of the shadow of death, though I know I do not deserve it, I come back from the gates of Hell. The Day gives me hope, gives me life. Life goes on.

I know this process can be undertaken throughout the year, at any time and in any place. But the magic of Yom Kipur is that while we are all together during these 25 hours, the aura of the day weighs heavily on us. It takes us down, but then, magically, it lifts us up. That is resurrection.