

THE REALITY OF THE RESURRECTION

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In biblical times, belief in *Olam haba*, “the world to come,” was common among the Jewish people. But that began to change in modern times, especially after the Holocaust, so that today, only 38% of Jewish people today believe in heaven.¹ This is the lowest percentage of all major religions.

A similar falling away is evident when it comes to the resurrection. Orthodox Jews do indeed live their lives with a future resurrection in mind. That means saving parts of the body like finger nail clippings, hair and internal organs that have been removed, such as the appendix. These items are then buried with the body in anticipation of the later resurrection of the body.

But the rest of the Jewish community does not share this devotion to a future resurrection. It is far more common to find Jewish people today who believe that when you die, you simply cease to exist, so that not only does your body stop functioning, but your soul—your inner being—terminates, with no hope for life after death. And we see this reflected in the modern practices of Judaism, such as the Reform prayer book removing all references to the resurrection. Thus there has been an intentional shifting from an emphasis on the hereafter to the here and now.

In fact nearly as many Jewish people today believe in reincarnation as in the resurrection and heaven. They believe that souls can return to life on earth residing in completely different bodies. This emphasis has been popularized by a growing interest in Buddhism and the New Age among Jews, as well as a heightened interest in *Kabbalah*—Jewish mysticism. Although *Kabbalah* appears to be Orthodox Judaism on the outside, it advocates most aspects of New Age beliefs, including reincarnation. They call it *Gilgul Neshamo*—“Cycle of the Souls.” The *Zohar*, the spiritual book of *Kabbalah*, was written during the Middle Ages in the Thirteenth century. It states:

“As long as a person is unsuccessful in his purpose in this world, the Holy One, blessed be He, uproots him and replants him over and over again.” (Zohar I 186b)

The *Zohar* goes on to describe how many chances a soul gets to be reincarnated and if a soul can be reincarnated as an animal or even plants and minerals.²

The problem with these beliefs, like other contemporary religions that suddenly appear on the world scene, is that they are in direct conflict with the Bible. The Bible makes no allowance for souls to return to earth and start all over again: “It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment” (Heb 9:27).

So clearly the popular beliefs we encounter today are very different from the way that people believed in biblical times. But since God is the same yesterday, today and forever

¹ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey (2009).

² *Tikunnei Zohar* 70 133a; *Shaar HaGilgulim* 22 and 29; *Sefer Haredim* 33, *Ohr HaChaim* 1:26.

(Heb 13:8), we can turn to God's Word and find a true and timeless description of life on this earth and in the world to come. It is a description that was revealed progressively over time and can be summed up in a series of biblical principles:

The Torah reveals that God can enable humanity to live forever

When we think about the story of the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden, we tend to focus on the sinful act and the consequences decreed by God. But lost in that momentous development is a simple but clear indication that if they hadn't sinned, they could have remained in the garden in perpetuity. The reason they could do it is the presence of the tree of life. Initially there was no prohibition against eating its fruit:

The LORD God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:16-17).

So in their state of innocence, there was no problem eating from the tree of life. But later, after they had sinned by eating from the fruit of the forbidden tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we are told:

Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever."

But that was a problem because living forever in a sinful state is not in God's best interests, so He expelled them from the garden and thus prevented their ability to eat from the tree of life. The point is that God has already set the precedent of enabling human beings to live forever when they are in a state that is untainted by sin. And the rest of the Bible is all about restoring humanity to such a state, which is ultimately accomplished through Yeshua (Jesus). But we have to recognize that from the very beginning it was God's desire for humanity to live with Him in an everlasting way.

The prophets reveal that God can enable us to live again

While we can appreciate God allowing for the potential of everlasting life, it is also clear that the sin of Adam and Eve led to the fulfillment of God's warning that disobedience would cause them to die. And by virtue of a fallen sin nature being passed on to every generation of humanity, we all share in the certainty of death. But as we continue on in the Holy Scriptures, God began showing that humanity's physical death did not have to remain permanent. It is in the writings of the prophets that God revealed the concepts of the immortality of the soul and the bodily resurrection of humanity.

But first it is important to note that not everyone in biblical times shared in this belief. That was the case of the Sadducees. And it is only when we consider their history that it makes sense why they rejected the resurrection.

When the people of Judah were allowed to return to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity, only a small percentage did—about 50,000 in four waves—and this included the *cohanim*/priests who resumed Temple worship. Over the centuries that followed they formed a party of priests and supporters of priestly authority. They became known as the Sadducees (*Tz'dukim*). So most of the Sadducees were priests or had formerly served as priests. Because of their emphasis on the Torah and temple worship, their beliefs were limited to what was established in Torah. And since

the Torah did not explicitly affirm the resurrection and the immortality of the soul or life after death, they did not accept it as truth. Their focus was on the here and now, primarily on temple worship. And when you died, according to their way of thinking, you ceased to exist.

The great majority of the Jewish people stayed behind in Babylon, about one million altogether, and they were living there when Babylon was conquered by Persia. Unlike the Sadducees, they accepted the writings of the prophets as being inspired by God. Thus they believed in the resurrection and the immortality of the soul. Some of those sages eventually made their way to Jerusalem, and brought their beliefs with them. By the time of Yeshua, these men who lived in Jerusalem were known as the Pharisees (*P'rushim*). Eventually they became the majority and formed the basis for Judaism after the destruction of the Temple.

It is only when the prophets are accepted as speaking God's message, that God's plan for humanity after death can be fully understood. One of those passages is found in Isaiah 26. There, the prophet issued a declaration regarding the righteous people in the land of Judah in the midst of widespread unrighteousness that soon would lead to the nation being taken captive. Isaiah challenged them to trust in the Lord who is our Rock (26:4). But then he revealed an even greater hope:

Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, for your dew is as the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits (Isa 26:19).

He made it clear that death is not the end for the righteous. This is the first direct revelation of a future day of resurrection. And in the generations that followed Isaiah, the people of Israel understood this resurrection to be associated with the arrival of the Messiah.

The prophet Daniel, who wrote his book at the end of the Babylonian captivity, added to the revelation by God about His plans for this world. He foretold in great detail what would transpire on earth, from the rise and fall of kingdoms to the exact timing of the coming of Messiah and also his death. So when Daniel speaks under the inspiration of God on the resurrection, we ought to pay close attention:

Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt (Dan 12:1-2).

Daniel's prophetic word shows that all people will face a future resurrection. But there will be a distinction made among people. Everlasting life is the great promise for the righteous of this world. It is a life after death without end in God's presence.

Everlasting contempt, according to the original Hebrew, is literally something that you hate or is repulsive. That describes what it is like spending eternity in isolation from God and those who have been redeemed by Him. It is all about judgment being made by God about our lives, and in particular, about what we have done about our sin that has separated us from Him.

The New Testament reveals that Yeshua secures our resurrection and everlasting life

John 11 tells the familiar story of Yeshua raising Lazarus from the dead. When Yeshua declared to Martha that He intended to raise Lazarus from the dead, she wasn't thinking about Him doing it right then. She responded by saying: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." (Jn 11:24). This was a reflection of the common Jewish belief of

that day about their ultimate resurrection in the day of the Messiah. But what she didn't realize was that the same Messianic resurrection power was present right in front of her. The same One who will bring about the resurrection of humanity on the Last Day was fully capable of resurrecting her brother at that very moment, as well as resurrecting Himself from the grave about one week later. It's about the omnipotent power of Yeshua as the Son of God:

Yeshua said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die." (Jn 11:25).

This, then, is the key to our own resurrection. It is based on the reality of Yeshua's resurrection from the grave.

The resurrection of Yeshua—myth or reality?

How confident can we be that Yeshua's resurrection was real? For if it is a myth, then we have no hope for ourselves. But the nature of myths is that they are limited to the creativity of the mind. And it is impossible to have witnesses who can confirm the truth of what is in your mind. On the other hand, the nature of actual events in history is that they are public and witnesses can attest to what transpired.

How did this experience affect Peter and the other Apostles? In the book of Acts they continually testified that they were eye-witnesses of the risen Yeshua (Acts 2:32). Later, both Peter and John stated that "we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). And this was right after they had been thrown in jail and soon they would face death for proclaiming it.

Their actions show that they knew it was not a lie or a legend, which would never move you to risk it all by defending it. Instead, when you have experienced something with your own eyes, your motivation is to testify regarding its truthfulness. These men were willing to be beaten and imprisoned, even to the point of dying for the truth. And that was indeed the case with Peter, who made it clear that he would die for his faith in Yeshua (2 Pet 1:14,15). He wrote that letter while in prison and a short time later, he was martyred for his faith. We also know that according to tradition, Peter was crucified upside down because he believed he was unworthy to die in the same manner as Yeshua.

The other disciples met similar fates—some were crucified, others were stoned or speared or decapitated. Only John died a natural death, and that was while being forced to live as an exiled prisoner on the barren island of Patmos. The point is that these men were all willing to live their lives and to give them up because they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that everything they were saying about Yeshua was true, especially His resurrection from the dead.

Paul goes on to say that there were even more eye-witnesses who were alive in that day:

After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me [Paul] also (1 Cor 15:6-8).

It is interesting to note that both James and Paul were initially skeptics about Yeshua. John 7:5 says that James, the brother of Yeshua, did not believe He was the Messiah and Savior. But after Yeshua was resurrected and appeared to James, he completely turned his life around and he became the leader of the body of believers in Jerusalem. Paul, who was also known as Saul, was the leader of a different sort. He headed up the obsessive persecution of Messianic believers, including the stoning to death of Stephen. So for him to be transformed into the

greatest advocate of belief in Yeshua, something radical had to take place in his life, and that was being confronted personally by the risen Yeshua on the road to Damascus.

Five hundred more people were similar witnesses to the fact of the resurrection. Most of these people were still alive when Paul wrote those words. So they could easily refute what he was saying if it was not true. And the likelihood is that Paul would never even have mentioned them if they did not share the same personal conviction of having seen the risen Messiah Yeshua with their own eyes.

All this to say that the evidence is powerful and cannot be refuted in any reasonable manner. And that is ultimately for our benefit, as we can believe with great assurance that Yeshua is exactly what the Word of God says He is, including being the victor over death itself. This understanding also has great implications for us personally:

But now Messiah has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Messiah all shall be made alive. But each in his own order: Messiah the first fruits, after that those who are Messiah's at His coming (1 Cor. 15:20-23).

The Old Testament saints had the promise of a future resurrection. But they did not know what was the basis that made it possible. Today we have that answer. If the Messiah, the holy one of Israel who possesses the fully divinity of God, can overcome death, then we, as His heirs of promise (Rom 8:17; Gal 3:29), share in that same victory. And what a great blessing that is. We are told:

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:52-53).

The good news is that our resurrection bodies will be perfected, just as our souls will have been perfected, never to perish, never to sin again. And never separated from the presence of the Lord and each other. In fact, we are told that the same tree of life that humans had been separated from, will be reunited with us in our heavenly dwelling place (Rev 22:2). That is our great promise, one that is backed by the name and the power of Yeshua who defeated death by His own resurrection (1 Cor 15:57).

So when we consider the full Word of God, we can see God's plan for enabling humanity to live on in an everlasting manner. But if you do not read the Scriptures, how can you know that it is true?

- If the Torah is just a myth and cannot be a description of real history, as some believe, then the Tree of Life will be meaningless, and so will be the possibility of everlasting life.
- If the warnings and teachings of the prophets are not to be taken literally, and you avoid the book of Daniel altogether because of an ancient rabbinic curse on reading it, and thus Jews never have any clue on what it describes, you will never know that God has promised an actual resurrection from the dead.
- And if you reject the New Testament out of hand because it is a "book for Christians," in spite of being written by fellow Jews, you will never have a chance to understand the great hope of everlasting life through faith in Yeshua.

So yes, if you remain in ignorance, it is easy to see how you will be skeptical about what lies beyond the grave. But having been informed by the truth of the Word of God and the gift of

faith that He has given to us, we are able to live our lives with confidence and purpose. The Messianic way of faith upholds the resurrection of Yeshua as a historical reality.

One of the great promises that all believers cherish is being reunited in Paradise with our loved ones who were also believers. It doesn't matter when we live or die, everyone who names Yeshua as Lord will all share in the blessed hope of everlasting life. God established that reality in the Garden of Eden. The prophets foretold our resurrection. And most importantly, Yeshua secured these things for us when He overcame death and rose again in triumph. That is a great victory in which we all share when we believe in Him.