A Jewish Response to the McGinley Lecture, “Life After Death”

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One thing many Catholics and Jews share is that we are not quite sure what we believe about life after death, nor what our tradition really teaches. My Catholic students, in spite of knowing their Apostles’ Creed, which includes the affirmation of resurrection of the body, will tell me that the body dies, but the spirit lives on. My Jewish friends, in spite of reciting the blessing, “Blessed are you, O Lord, who gives life to the dead” as part of the central prayer of Jewish liturgy, will sometimes say, they don’t believe in any afterlife, and certainly not resurrection of the body. Some will claim Judaism as a whole rejects the idea.

One can hardly blame anyone. The idea of bodily resurrection is counter-intuitive, anti-empirical, and as many pagans thought, quite unseemly. The pagan Celsus, remarks that the body is full of all kinds of things not nice to mention and God would neither want nor be able to make it immortal. He asks, “What sort of person would have any further desire for a body that has rotted? (Against Celsus 5.14).

The answer that many early Jews and Christians would give to Celsus: a person who believes in the power of God. Belief in resurrection emerges from a creation theology that stresses God as creator of the world and the human body. It carries with it several significant theological motifs that distinguish these early groups. So belief in bodily resurrection is two things, I think, shorthand for a set of ideas about God and justice, as well as a boundary-marker that carves out identity and separation for different
religious communities. In other words, it is a symbol that reaches beyond itself and trails all kinds of ideas in its wake: belief in God’s power and providence, the union of body and soul, ultimate reward and punishment, and not incidentally, the legitimacy of those who teach it.

I won’t say too much about the ideas of afterlife in the Hebrew Bible, as Professor Ryan has taught us about the Isaiah and Ezekiel material. But I would say two things: first, the idea of afterlife is at least implicit in the Hebrew Bible in some of the language of Sheol, or references to spirits of the underworld (*rephaim*, “shades:” Prov 9:18), the forbidding of necromancy and divination, the calling up of the dead. Second, although the Ezekiel imagery of chapter 37 is often explained away as merely referring to national renewal, we have to ask “Why this metaphor?” Why would anyone use such a graphic example of bodily resurrection as Ezekiel 37 unless they are speaking to a people who accept some kind of afterlife? “I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin…” (v. 6). It implies they could imagine resurrection, even if this case is a metaphor. As Richard Friedman and Shauna Overton put it, the biblical silence on afterlife is really more of a whisper.¹ There is a fresco of Ezekiel’s vision in the Dura-Europos synagogue in Syria in the third century, and another in the same synagogue showing Elijah’s raising of the widow’s son from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24).

What got me interested in the topic of resurrection of the body is that I noticed it was such a deal-breaker for many early groups. People were read in or out of early communities based on whether or not they accepted it. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the preaching of resurrection contributed to the Pharisees’ popularity with the
people. In the example Father Ryan brought from Mark, Jesus writes off the Sadducees as ignoramuses because they reject it, saying they do not understand God’s power or their own Scripture. Paul begins 1 Cor 15 saying, “How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there’s no resurrection, then Christ has not been raised” and the whole enterprise of his preaching is futile. Justin Martyr in the second century says those who deny the resurrection of the dead do not deserve to be called Christians (Dial. 80.4-5). Let’s look at the rabbis from the beginning of the third century.

In Mishnah Sanhedrin, a collection of laws gathered from earlier traditions, we read that:

All Israel has a share in the world to come, as it is said, *Thy people shall all be righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the branch of my planting, the work of my hands that I may be glorified* (Isa 60:21). And these are the ones that have no portion in the world to come: he who says there is no resurrection of the dead [to be derived from the Torah], the Torah does not come from heaven, and an Epicurean. Rabbi Akiba says, Also he who reads heretical books, and he who whispers over a wound and says, *I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord who heals you* (Ex 15:26). Abba Saul says, Also, he who pronounces the Divine Name as it is spelled out (Mishnah Sanhedrin 10.1).

This is very unusual. The Rabbis very rarely legislate belief. Most of the Mishnah is about what one does, laws relating to prayers agricultural laws, Sabbath observance, marriage and divorce, criminal and civil matters, and the like. They do have terms for
people who we would call heretics, like *kofer ha ikkar*, one who “cuts the root” or denies a basic tenet (or the rabbis’ authority), but most statements focus on observance. Note here that all of Israel is slated for some kind of afterlife, except these three groups, those who deny resurrection, those who deny the divine origin of the Torah, and Epicureans, or *Apikorsim*. Epicureanism was a popular philosophical movement at the time; one of its tenets rejected Providence. Whether there were gods or a god or not, divine beings did not involve themselves in human affairs.

Why? Why did it matter to anyone whether their fellow Jew (or Christian) believed in resurrection or any kind of afterlife? What could be less relevant for everyday relationships? I think the answer is that resurrection of the body was a symbol that condenses a set of beliefs. In studying these texts, I noticed many of the same ideas seemed to accompany resurrection. Let me just list them.

First, belief in the power and providence of God. More than any other idea, it seems to be a companion idea to resurrection. Note that the *Mishnah* about resurrection also rejects Epicureans, who deny God’s care for the world. In 2 Maccabees 7:22-23, the mother encourages her son to martyrdom, saying she was not the one to give him life, but the creator of the universe, who will return his life and breath in bodily resurrection.

Second, another idea that fuels resurrection belief is the desire for justice. Clearly the evil are not punished in this life, nor the good properly rewarded, so some kind of afterlife is required. Body and soul acted in concert to do good or evil in this world, so they must reunited to receive the proper punishment or reward. Mere death is not enough, as some Christian apologists also note, because it happens to everyone. It would be a boon for the wicked (1 *Apol.* 18.1; *Athenagoras*, Res. 19.7). One rabbinic story talks
about body and soul using the analogy of a blind man and a lame man who had to team up to steal figs from a king’s orchard, the lame man riding on the blind man’s back. When they were caught, the king punished them together, since neither could have acted alone (*Lev. Rab. 4.8*). The king, of course is God, reflecting on the nature of a human being.

This is my last point, that the human being at least in these early sources, as in the Hebrew Bible, is a composite, a unity. Later rabbinic literature will indulge in more of a dualism that privileges soul over body, as will later Christian theology. Perhaps this is a good place to think about Paul’s imagery in 1 Corinthians 15. He’s a hard nut to crack here. The seed metaphor does suggest some continuity between the psychic body (*soma psychikon*) that is put in the ground, and the spiritual body that is raised (*soma pneumatikon*), just as there is some aspect of a seed that grows into a plant. On the other hand, he says “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom” (15:50). So what is resurrected? He started the chapter castigating church members who rejected resurrection. I do not find helpful people who say he means a non-corporeal body is raised, since that literally means a non-body body. “Spiritual resurrection” is a meaningless term, and Paul cannot mean ordinary survival of the spirit, because then the seed metaphor doesn’t work. Dale Martin’s work suggests the ancients thought of the self as a mix of substances on a continuum from matter to spirit, so the body was a “hierarchy of essences.” Bodies that suffer, face danger, and go through are death are not dismissed as unimportant, but are transformed through God’s power, from ordinary matter-laden bodies to transformed, pneumatic bodies. But they are physical bodies throughout.
So Paul rails against those who go for a more Platonic ideal that liberates the soul from the body at death.

Back to the Rabbis: We see that this rich belief seems to be a shorthand theology that carves out identity and distinguishes particular groups. Let’s look at the Gevurah, or “power” Blessing from the Shemoneh Esreh, the Eighteen Blessings, a prayer which, along with the Shema, is central to Jewish liturgy.

You, O Lord, are mighty forever; you revive the dead; you are powerful in saving. You sustain the living with loving kindness. You give life to the dead in great mercy. You support the falling, and heal the sick, and free the captive, and keep faith with those who sleep in the dust. Who compares with you, Master of power, and who is like you? [You are] King over life and death, causing salvation to flourish. You are faithful in bringing life to the dead. Blessed are you, O Lord, who revives the dead.

This is standard in Orthodox and Conservative congregations. It is also the most frequently cited example when people talk about the problem of not believing literally everything in the prayer book. It also became a distinguishing feature between Jews, especially when Reform Judaism revised the prayer book to something considered more rational in the 19th century. David Einhorn introduced the formula God “who has implanted within us eternal life” in his prayer book in 1856. The new Union Prayer Book of 1975 uses the following, “who gives life to all.” But look at the more recent Prayer Book from 2007, which re-introduces resurrection as an option, “Blessed are You, O Lord, who gives life to all (revives the dead).” My husband a Reform rabbi, finds this re-introduction of resurrection very troubling, and wonders if Reform Judaism might lose its
distinct identity. It’s not the only issue, of course, but he says “what does it mean to be Reform any more?”

So this idea is still a deal-breaker, part of group’s sense of identity. It has also been identified more with Christianity than Judaism, another reason some Jews see it as foreign. By the second century resurrection of the body ballooned in importance for Christians. They had to confront the pagan challenges directly, including charges of atheism, incest, and cannibalism (against which resurrection was a good argument). Christians were also absorbing newcomers into their communities at a rapid rate and faith statements like “I believe in the resurrection of the dead (or flesh)” were efficient ways to encapsulate the values of the group. Jews did not develop the same kind of full-blown apologetic. In spite of some outbreaks of violence against Jews, they generally did not need to explain their religion to outsiders. It had the defense of antiquity, and they were already a distinct people by virtue of their lifestyle. And generally Judaism is a less creedal religion.

In spite of its Hebrew and Jewish roots, the idea of resurrection was picked up by Christians and became increasingly identified with it. As rationalism stirred European Jews in the nineteenth century, some were anxious to shuck it off. I would say Jews are not robed in certainty. But we are robed in hope. When one goes to a Jewish funeral, the eulogy will sometimes slip into imagining the person as still present with God, or someone we’ll see again. We retain the stubborn optimism that is part of this idea from our classic texts, its sense of human wholeness and value, its claim that God created the world, including the body, and saw that it was good.
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