

## **A D'var Tefilah on the Words מחיה המתים in the G'vurot**

When I was a kid, my father dragged me to Shul every "Shabbos." I say "dragged" because, depending on the season, I preferred to be playing baseball, football or hockey with my friends. But, no, I had to go to Shul.

While my father was insistent about going to Shul, he was much less concerned about the time that we would leave the house, which explains why I know Ashrei, Hatzi Kaddish, Ein Keiloheinu, Mourner's Kaddish, Aleinu, and Adon Olam far better than most brachot in Shacharit.

What I did not include in that list is the Musaf Amidah. It was so much longer than the other brachot -- and I had ADD. In other words, I did not pay that much attention to the Amidah.

That inattention changed dramatically after June 24, 1978, which was the worst day of my life. Because, on that day, like every day that preceded it, I couldn't wait to get up to see Guy, my beautiful, bouncing, 9-month old baby boy.

But when I walked into his room that day, he was not bouncing in his crib. Instead, he was lying there lifeless. I tried frantically to revive him, but I failed.

To make things worse, the pathologist who performed the autopsy told me that the cause of death was "crib death," which today is called SIDS, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SUID, Sudden Unexplained Infant Death. In other words, I still don't know why Guy died.

Since that day, however, I have had the great good fortune to go on to have two more children -- my son Danny and my daughter Lauren -- who are the greatest sources of joy in my life and help heal my broken heart -- and both of them are here to support and comfort me today.

But in today's service, as in every other Shul service I have ever attended since that most terrible day, I am reminded of my son Guy with every reading of the words מחיה המתים, which appear in the G'vurot portion of the Amidah.

[READ THE G'VUROT ALOUD]

As you may have noticed, the words מחיה המתים appear 3 times in 5 sentences. Each time I read the G'vurot, however, I still wonder what the words מחיה המתים are intended to mean.

Often, when I read those words, I am reminded of a question that Mark Friedman asked me after a Shabbat service when I had had Yahrzeit for my son a few years ago.

Specifically, Mark asked if I minded a question about my son, and after I said "of course not," he asked if I believed in Olam Ha-Ba. As I told Mark, I don't know whether there is an Olam Ha-Ba, but I hope it exists and that I can get there, because I would love to see my son Guy again. But, I continued, I wondered that, if heaven does exist, would Guy be 9 months old, or would he be a grown man?

As learned as Mark is in Yiddishkeit, he did not have the answer, either, and that question has remained with me to this day.

It is in that light that, a few months ago, I asked Rabbi Maltzman what he thought about the idea of me giving a D'var Tefilah on מחיה המתים. I hoped -- naively, it turns out -- that preparing a D'var Tefilah on מחיה המתים would shed light on a topic that has weighed so heavily on me for decades.

When the Rabbi encouraged me to do the D'var Tefilah, I began my research by turning to the translation of the G'vurot in our current Siddur, which reads:

You are ever mighty, Adonai –  
You give life to the dead –  
Great is Your saving power.

You sustain the living through kindness and love,  
And with great mercy give life to the dead,  
You support the falling, heal the sick,  
Loosen the chains of the bound,  
And keep faith with those who sleep in the dust.

Who is like you, Almighty,  
And who can be compared to You?  
The sovereign who brings death and life  
And causes redemption to flourish.

You are faithful in bringing life to the dead.  
Barukh atah Adonai, who gives life to the dead.<sup>1</sup>

I don't know about you, but that did not clarify things for me. So I turned to our previous Siddur, Siddur Sim Shalom, the blue one.<sup>2</sup> There, it translated the G'vurot in similar terms, such as "You give life to the dead," but also with a few differences, such as "You are the master of life and death and deliverance."

Although the direct translation of the words מחיה המתים – "giving life to the dead" – is the same, what is the word "deliverance" intended to mean? Nothing in that Siddur provided an explanation.

So I turned to the Siddur that we used in the days when I went to Shul with my father: The Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book, the black Siddur.<sup>3</sup>

There, the Siddur states that G-d "callest the dead" to "immortal life" and to "life everlasting" -- and that G-d is "mighty in deliverance," too. It also states that G-d "bringest forth salvation."

But I don't find those more stilted words or that Siddur's use of synonyms for the direct translation of מחיה המתים to be illuminating. Indeed, are the words "deliverance" and "salvation" intended to refer to Olam Ha-Ba, or do they allude to current times?

In short, after reading these 3 Siddurim and other translations of the G'vurot, I am still perplexed by the meaning of מחיה המתים. So, I turned to the Rambam. Unfortunately, I did not find the Guide for the Perplexed helpful, either.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Feld, ed., Siddur Lev Shalem for Shabbat & Festivals, p. 186 (The Rabbinical Assembly, 2016) (emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> See Jules Harlow, ed., Siddur Sim Shalom, p. 430 (The Rabbinical Assembly, 1985) (emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> See Morris Silverman, ed., Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book, p. 138 (The Rabbinical Assembly, 1946) (emphasis added).

I then turned to the writings of Rabbi Neil Gillman,<sup>4</sup> whom Rabbi Maltzman had recommended. There, I learned that the first mention of death in all of our classical texts occurs in chapter 2 of B'reshith, where death is presented as a threat. But in chapter 3, after Adam and Even have eaten the forbidden fruit, they are informed that they will suffer certain punishments, and that Adam's punishment will endure until he "returns to the ground" – ad shuvcha el ha-adamah – because, as G-d reminds him, "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:19)." In other words, Rabbi Gillman interprets that phrase to mean that death is "a punishment for the sins of our ancestors."

Turning to Olam Ha-Ba, there is only one explicit verse in Hebrew scripture that suggests that dead people can live again: Daniel 12:2-3," p. 94, which states:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life; others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence.

The reference to those who lie in the dust of the earth clearly refers back to Adam's fate in Genesis 3 and therefore to the dead. But the mention of "eternal life" is the first explicit reference to an afterlife in Jewish thinking.

The idea that human beings will live again after death cannot be found in Jewish writings much before the second century BCE, and the idea that we possess a "soul" that never dies is not found until roughly a century later, i.e., the first century BCE.

Since then, most of the Western world, including many Jews, has characterized death as the soul's separation from the body. This view stems originally from Greek philosophy, certainly from Plato, if not before. In Plato's dialogue, Phaedo, set in the hours before Socrates' suicide, Socrates characterizes death as "the separation of soul and body ...."

However much this notion of separation of soul from body eventually became part of most Jews' understanding of the afterlife, it is not at all the biblical view.

Indeed, the Tanakh portrays each human as a single entity, clothed in clay-like flesh that is animated or vivified by a life-giving spark or impulse variously called ruah, nefesh, neshamah, or nishmat hayyim.

In the later tradition, these terms came to be understood as synonymous with the Greek concept of "soul." But this identification is not in the Tanakh.

The term "nefesh" signifies the neck or the throat (as in Psalm 69:2), or the breath that passes through the throat (as in Job 41:13), or the life-blood (as in Vayyikrah 17:10-11). In other words, it signifies a living human being since it refers to the two characteristics that make a person alive: Breath and blood. Thus, when Jacob's progeny are identified as "70 nefesh" in Sefer Shemoth, it means 70 living persons, not 70 disembodied souls.

The term "neshamah" also means "breath," as in a living person (as in I Kings 17:17).

In short, death is understood as the "going out" of the ruah (as in Bereshith 35:18) or of G-d's "taking away" the nefesh (as in I Kings 19:14) or the neshamah (as in Job 34:14).

It is precisely this notion that something "goes out" of the body at death that enabled the later non-Jewish tradition to identify this "going out" with Plato's soul. But in the Jewish tradition, what leaves the body is not a distinct "spirit" or substance, but rather that igniting spark that gives life to the body in the first place.

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<sup>4</sup> See Neil Gillman, The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought (2015 ed.); Neil Gillman, Believing and Its Tensions: A Personal Conversation about G-d, Torah, Suffering and Death in Jewish Thought (2013).

As a rabbinic consensus on Olam Ha-Ba emerged, these two theories – the resurrection of the body and the eternity of the soul – though apparently quite contradictory, merge. The cumulative effect, which becomes accepted in almost all of Jewish history for centuries thereafter, is that death is the separation of the body and the soul; the bodies are buried and the souls go off to G-d; and eventually (after the time of the coming of the Mashiah), G-d unites each body and soul again. Then, in the original sense of identity that we possessed during our lives on Earth, we come before G-d in judgment.

Until the book of Daniel -- which is a very late contribution to Hebrew scripture that is conventionally dated around the year 165 BCE – everyone died a terminal death. This suggests that it took the introduction of an outside notion of the afterlife to teach us something different about the inevitability of death for human beings.

Indeed, the fact that everyone in the Torah died – with the possible exceptions of Enoch, who “walked with G-d; then he was no more, for G-d took him” (B’raishit 5:24), and Elijah, who “went up to heaven in a whirlwind” (II Kings 2:11) -- no-one ever suggested that any of our ancient ancestors would live again. If anything, that confirms the notion that death was just accepted as part of the human experience.

After a good many hours of study, what have I learned? Unfortunately, I must concede that I could not find a definitive answer as to the meaning of מִחֵיה הַמַּתִּים

### CONCLUSION

In that light, let me leave you with a few parting thoughts.

First, as Rabbi Joseph Telushkin has written:

According to Judaism, what happens in the next world? [O]n this subject there is little material....

All attempts to describe heaven and hell are, of course, speculative. Because Judaism believes that G-d is good, it believes that G-d rewards good people; it does not believe that Hitler and his victims share the same fate. Beyond that, it is hard to assume much more. We are asked to leave afterlife in G-d’s hands.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, to me -- a person who believes in science and tends to be rational -- I am, sadly, skeptical about ever seeing Guy again. Still, I have hope – and I will never let go of that hope.

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Telushkin, Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History at 548 (1991).