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# Parshat Vaera: Do we progressive Jews believe in the resurrection of the dead?

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The Book of Exodus tells us about how we became a nation. It can also help us to clarify our religious beliefs. In this week's parsha, Vaera, we come across a talmudic reference to one of the classical rabbinic tradition's central religious doctrines — resurrection. The resurrection of the dead has been one of the most controversial Jewish doctrines since antiquity.

Resurrection is the belief that ultimately the dead will be revived in their own bodies and live again on earth. A major tenet of traditional Jewish eschatology alongside belief in the coming of a messiah, resurrection is heavily documented from the Maccabean period (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) onwards. It may have developed even earlier.

In the Talmud, there is an interesting proof text brought by Rabbi Simai supporting the concept of the resurrection of the dead that references Parshat Vaera. "I also established My covenant with them (our Ancestors), to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners" (Exodus 6:4, new Jewish Publication Society translation).

Rabbi Simai notes, in *Messechet Sanhedrin* 90b, that Exodus 6:4 does not say “to give you” but “to give them,” implying that God would give the land to the Ancestors personally, and thus that God would resurrect them so as to fulfill that promise!

*Minim* (followers of another Jewish sect) then asked Rabban Gamaliel: Whence do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, will resurrect the dead? He answered them that we know this from multiple sources – from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Hagiographa, yet the *minim* did not accept any of these support texts as conclusive proof. The Sadducees rejected the belief in resurrection of the dead, which was a central tenet believed by Pharisees, so the reference may have been to them.

The Sages emphasized the importance of this doctrine. The tenth chapter of *Mishnah Sanhedrin* begins, “All of Israel has a portion in the world to come, as it is said (Isa. 60:21) ‘And Thy people are all righteous, at the End they shall inherit the land...’ and the following have no portion in the world to come: one who says, ‘There is no resurrection of the dead...’” In the medieval period, Maimonides chose it as the last of his 13 principles of faith. Despite its prominence, it was rejected by most modern Jewish thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It was thought that the belief in resurrection had been uprooted by natural philosophical arguments. At the rabbinical conference held at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1869, the rabbis present –mostly radical reformers — agreed that the belief in resurrection of the body has no foundation in modern Judaism, and that the belief in the immortality of the soul should substitute for it in future editions of the siddur.

The American Reform movement took it out of the liturgy, substituting *mechayei hakol*, “the God who gives life to all”, for the original phrase, *mechayei hametim*, “the God who brings the dead back to life.” However, the concept is slowly but surely making its way back into our belief system. So what has happened?

It may be that we need our religion to impart mystery. Ever since the Emancipation and the Enlightenment, we Progressive Jews have been trying to bring rigorous scholarship into our religion. It is a noble project, a sign of our commitment to the reconciliation of rationalism and faith. It may also be too logical.

After all, religion is not necessarily logical. We may not be looking for our Judaism to make sense in the conventional understanding of that term. Just look at Chabad. Contrast their theology, which is rather non-conventional to put it gently, with the tremendous enthusiasm they can generate in some circles.

It may be that we will not be able to understand the mystery of being alive solely through rational discourse, despite our most fervent study of Maimonides. We need to combine

logic with entry into the trans-rational realm. Otherwise, we can lose the very object that we are trying to capture.

We do not know what happens after we die. If we pray for God to *mechayei hametim*, bring the dead back to life, we can interpret this symbolically rather than literally. But it helps us to enter the realm of God's world, to envision what the mystical experience so essential to religiosity might be like. And for that, I believe it has great importance in our relationship with God and our search for a deeply felt spirituality.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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