

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term II.3

### Opening Comments

There are two major developments to keep in mind as we consider the teaching of the Rabbis about the resurrection, the end of the ages, the Day of Judgment, and the World-to-Come. The first is that, aside from the twelfth chapter of Daniel and two short passages from Isaiah, there is no mention of the resurrection in the Hebrew Bible. As we have seen, the expectation was that everyone, the righteous and sinners, would descend to Sheol on their death, where they would be gathered to their kin, but would lose all contact with God and with the world of the living. Around 170 BCE, Jews who were being martyred for their obedience to the Law of God revealed by Moses expressed the hope that the God who created all things from what did not exist, would give life back to them if they died for God's Laws. At the time of Jesus and Paul, this view was held by the Pharisees, which is a group of Jewish laymen who studied the law and attempted to apply it to all realms of life, including laws governing worship in the Temple. They would do this in combination of the tradition of the fathers, which they held to be as authoritative as the written Law. They were opposed by the Sadducees, who were the priests in charge of the Temple. The Sadducees rejected the teaching of the resurrection because it could not be found in the Torah of Moses. If the tradition is correct that the Amidah prayer began to be formulated and used after the Babylonian exile, and so would have been in use during the Second Temple, the second prayer would indicate that there was already a widely shared belief in the resurrection of the dead, or that the authors of the prayer wanted to make sure that this was a widely and deeply held belief, given that the prayer alludes to resurrection six times.

You, O Lord, are mighty forever, **you revive the dead**, you have the power to save. You sustain the living with lovingkindness, **you revive the dead** with great mercy, you support the falling, heal the sick, set free the bound and **keep faith with those who sleep in the dust**. Who is like you, O doer of mighty acts? Who resembles you, a king who puts to death and **restores to life**, and causes salvation to flourish? And you are certain to **revive the dead**. Blessed are you, O Lord, who **revives the dead**.

As a result of the Jewish wars against the Roman Empire, the city of Jerusalem was burnt, as was the Temple. As a consequence, we lost much of the literary evidence Jews would have produced during this period, so that almost all information we have about Jewish life during this time comes from the Jewish historian Josephus, the New Testament, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The loss of the Temple created a deep crisis in Jewish life, as it meant the loss of the central site of the worship of YHWH which bound Jews together throughout the world, to which they would make pilgrimage on high holy days when they

could. It also meant the loss of the central teaching authority of the Jews, as the priests in Jerusalem lost their seat of authority when the Temple was destroyed.

Over the period of several hundred years, the leadership of the Jews in exile passed to those laymen who studied the law and came to be considered Rabbis, or teachers. It used to be thought that the Rabbis emerged from the Pharisees after the destruction of the Second Temple, as they both believe in the resurrection and in the oral Law of Moses, which they both consider to be as authoritative as the written Law of Moses. Contemporary scholarship, however, seriously questions the reliability of this narrative, as the Rabbis never mention the Pharisees as the sect from which they emerged. Rather, they trace the transmission of the Oral Law to which they hold in an unbroken succession from Moses to their own day, and do not include any Pharisees in that chain of transmission. It appears that the Rabbis begin to emerge during the Second Temple period as a distinct group of scholars and teachers, but they do not emerge into historical view until the compilation of the Oral Torah in the Mishnah, around the year 200 CE. However, as we see in tonight's reading, the Rabbis share with the Pharisees a belief in the resurrection, and in the centrality of the Oral Torah.

Our readings for this week come from the Babylonian Talmud (600 CE), which was a commentary and elaboration on the Mishnah (200 CE). The Mishnah itself is a compilation of the oral Torah of Moses as that was discussed by the rabbinic sages from the time of the destruction of the Second Temple until the time of Judah the Prince (200 CE) (who is also called Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, or sometimes simply The Master). As already mentioned, the Rabbis see the oral Torah as being as authoritative as the written Torah. The Mishnah is not concerned to link the oral Torah to the written Torah or to the historical or prophetic writings of Israel. The Talmudic rabbis, on the other hand, are very concerned to tie the rulings of the Mishnah to the written Torah and prophets. They do this via the *Gemara*, which is the study of the Mishnah by means of a series of questions posed to discern its true meaning. This is especially the case with regard to the resurrection, which as we have seen is not in the Torah of Moses and is only in three passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, one from Daniel and the other two from Isaiah. Along with teaching the resurrection of the dead, the Rabbis also teach about "the end of days" (which is a phrase from Daniel), "the days of the Messiah," "the Day of Judgment," and "the World-to-Come." It is not clear, however, what the relationship is between these days and times, and thus there is a wide variety of ways in which these realities are related, as we will see next week with Maimonides.

The Rabbis are interested in apparent contradictions in the teaching of Scripture and the Mishnah regarding the resurrection. On the one hand, Scripture says that the blind and the lame will be gathered, and on the other, that the lame shall leap. The solution they propose combines both claims: "When resurrected, the dead will arise still afflicted with their defects, and they will then be healed." They also notice a difference in the way the prophets describe life on the other side of the resurrection. On the one hand, God will swallow up death forever; on the other hand, it says that the youngest shall die at one hundred years old. "The Gemara answers that this contradiction is not difficult. The verse here, in Isaiah chapter 25, is written with regard to the Jewish people, who will live forever after resurrection; the verse

there, in Isaiah chapter 65, is written with regard to gentiles, who will ultimately die after an extremely long life.”

We also get a better understanding of the relationship between the days of the Messiah and the World-to-Come. In the days of the Messiah, the bondage and exile of Jews will come to an end. Hence the days of the Messiah will be a more glorious version of our own world, as expressed in Isaiah 30, whereas the World-to-Come will be qualitatively different than this world, or even the day of the Messiah, as revealed in Isaiah 24. “The Gemara answers that this is not difficult. The verse here, in Isaiah chapter 30, is written with regard to the days of the Messiah, when the sun and moon will shine more brightly; the verse there, in Isaiah chapter 24, is written with regard to the World-to-Come, when the only light will be the light of God.” The qualitative difference of the World-to-Come is also expressed poetically in Berakhot 17a, which indicates that the World-to-Come may even transcend the day of resurrection.

Rav was wont to say:

The World-to-Come is not like this world.

In the World-to-Come there is no eating, no drinking,  
no procreation, no business negotiations,  
no jealousy, no hatred, and no competition.

Rather, the righteous sit with their crowns upon their heads, enjoying the splendor of the Divine Presence, as it is stated:

“And they beheld God, and they ate and drank” (Exodus 24:11), meaning that beholding God’s countenance is tantamount to eating and drinking.

Since the Talmud says that the lame will be raised and only then healed, it seems that in the resurrection one would still need one’s body, which may also be why the sun and moon shine more brightly in the day of the Messiah. However, in the World-to-Come, we will not need the sun and the moon, nor will we apparently need our bodies, for “the only light will be the light of God.” We will see this developed more fully by Maimonides next week, though this is not the only way of describing the relationship between the resurrection, the day of the Messiah, and the World-to-Come.

The Talmudic scholars devote a great amount of attention to answering the objection that we hear earlier expressed by the Sadducees: “From where is resurrection of the dead derived from the Torah?” This question is especially vexing since the Torah refers to the first five books of the Bible, and none of them explicitly speak of the resurrection of the dead. However, it becomes clear that the Rabbis have a more expansive understanding of the Torah in this section, as they refer to books throughout the Hebrew Bible. However, only two of them point to the verses in Daniel which clearly teach the resurrection: “Ravina says that resurrection is derived from here: ‘And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awaken, some to everlasting life, and some to reproaches and everlasting disgrace’ (Daniel 12:2). Rav Ashi says proof is derived from here: ‘But go you your way until the end be; and you shall rest, and arise to your lot at the end of days’ (Daniel 12:13).

The Talmudic scholars are especially interested in exploring the claim made by the Mishnah regarding who will enter the World-to-Come. The Mishnah categorically claims, “All of the Jewish people, even sinners and those who are liable to be executed with a court-imposed death penalty, have a share in the World-to-Come, as it is stated: ‘And your people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, for My name to be glorified’ (Isaiah 60:21).” However, the Rabbis immediately go on to detail who the exceptions to this claim will be: “One who says: There is no resurrection of the dead derived from the Torah, and one who says: The Torah did not originate from Heaven, and an *epikoros* [heretic], who treats Torah scholars and the Torah that they teach with contempt.” Rabbi Akiva adds to this, “one who reads external literature, and one who whispers invocations over a wound and says as an invocation for healing.” Abba Shaul adds, “one who pronounces the ineffable name of God as it is written, with its letters.” They then add kings and commoners by name as those excluded from the World-to-Come: The three kings are: Jeroboam, son of Nebat, and Ahab, both of whom were kings of Israel, and Manasseh, king of Judea. The four commoners are: Balaam, son of Beor; Doeg the Edomite; Ahithophel; and Gehazi.”

The Rabbis also explore the question of who will stand on the Day of Judgment, which appears to precede entering into the World-to-Come, and to follow the resurrection. This seems to be related to the verse in Daniel which speaks of some being raised to everlasting life, and some to everlasting contempt. We have already seen that for the Rabbis the Gentiles are not raised into everlasting life, nor are they raised unto everlasting contempt: rather, once they are raised they will die after one hundred years. However, the list of those who will be sentenced in the judgment to eternal contempt includes gentiles such as the generation at the time of Noah as well as the residents of Sodom. The Rabbis include Israelites among those raised to eternal contempt, such as the generation that died in the wilderness, the assembly of Krah, and the spies that brought an evil report about the land of Canaan.

The Rabbis also discuss who will stand on the day of judgment. They divide the Jews into three categories: the wholly righteous, the wholly wicked, and middling people who are both righteous and wicked. Before their death and the day of judgment, middling Jews have the opportunity every year to be written in the book of life due to their behavior during the days of awe: “middling people are left with their judgment suspended from Rosh HaShana until Yom Kippur, their fate remaining undecided. If they merit, through the good deeds and *mitzvot* that they perform during this period, they are written for life; if they do not so merit, they are written for death.” It also seems that middling people have another chance after they die.

Wholly righteous people will immediately be written and sealed for eternal life. Wholly wicked people will immediately be written and sealed for *Gehenna*, as it is stated: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall wake, some to eternal life and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2). Middling people will descend to *Gehenna* to be cleansed and to achieve atonement for their sins, and they will cry out in their pain and eventually ascend from there, as it is stated: “And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as

silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried; they shall call on My name, and I will answer them” (Zechariah 13:9). This is referring to the members of the third group, who require refinement and cleansing.

The House of Hillel thinks that the middling will not have to pass through Gehenna to be cleansed, due to the steadfast mercy of God, though this position does not find acceptance by the Rabbis.

The fate of those condemned to eternal contempt is quite brutal and hopeless. At times, it sound as if the wicked will be punished for a period of time and then annihilated:

The rebellious Jews who have sinned with their bodies and also the rebellious people of the nations of the world who have sinned with their bodies descend to *Gehenna* and are judged there for twelve months. After twelve months, their bodies are consumed, their souls are burned, and a wind scatters them under the soles of the feet of the righteous, as it is stated: “And you shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet” (Malachi 3:21).

At other times, it sounds as though their punishment will outlast the existence of Gehenna. For those Jews who are especially wicked, such as heretics, apostates, those who deny the resurrection, and those who deny the Torah, “*Gehenna* will terminate, but they still will not terminate, as it is stated: “And their form shall wear away the netherworld, so that there be no dwelling for Him” (Psalms 49:15); that is to say, *Gehenna* itself will be worn away before their punishment has come to an end.”

Finally, the Rabbis address the question of the resurrection of those who are not buried in the land of Israel, for they claim that Ezekiel claims only those buried in Israel will be raised, when he says: “And I will set glory [*tzvi*] in the land of the living” (Ezekiel 26:20). The land of Israel is so sacred that “Even a Canaanite maidservant in Eretz Yisrael is assured a place in the World-to-Come,” and “Anyone who walks four cubits in Eretz Yisrael is assured of a place in the World-to-Come.” However, after 70 CE, almost all Israelites die and are buried outside the land of Israel. Will they not be raised? The Rabbis develop an ingenious answer: “Rabbi Ile’a said: They will be resurrected by means of rolling, i.e., they will roll until they reach Eretz Yisrael, where they will be brought back to life.” When it is pointed out that such rolling would produce a great deal of suffering, a more ingenious solution is proposed: “Abaye said: Tunnels are prepared for them in the ground, through which they pass to Eretz Yisrael.”