

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term II.4

Opening Comments

In the reading from the Talmud for last week, we saw that the Rabbis spoke of Day of Judgment that seems to arrive at the same time as the resurrection of the dead, for this solves the problem of the soul and the body blaming each other for their sin. “So too, the Holy One, Blessed be He, brings the soul on the day of judgment and casts it back into the body, as they were when they sinned, and He judges them as one.”

However, in passages we did not read, the Talmud also speaks of a judgment that takes place at the time of death, after which the soul passes on to a place of blessing or condemnation.

Master of the Universe, You created the Garden of Eden and You created Gehenna, You created the righteous and You created the wicked. Master of the Universe, You have judged properly, You have acquitted properly, You have condemned properly, and it is befitting that You have prepared Gehenna for the wicked and the Garden of Eden for the righteous.

The awareness of this judgment at the time of death is reflected in the following story from the Talmud:

When Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai fell ill his students entered to visit him. When he saw them, he began to cry. He said to them: I cry in fear of heavenly judgment, as the judgment of the heavenly court is unlike the judgment of man. Now that they are leading me before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who lives and endures forever and all time; if He is angry with me, His anger is eternal; if He incarcerates me, His incarceration is an eternal incarceration; and if He kills me, His killing is for eternity. I am unable to appease Him with words and bribe him with money. Moreover, but I have two paths before me, one of the Garden of Eden and one of Gehenna, and I do not know on which they are leading me; and will I not cry?

Another tradition in the Talmud describes the destination of the righteous after death as being under the Throne of Glory. “It was taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Eliezer says: The souls of the righteous are stored beneath the Throne of Glory, as it is stated: ‘And the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life’ (I Samuel 25:29).” However, the Rabbis claim that none of the Jews will be destined for Gehenna, as even the sinners among them have stored up merit by obeying the commandments.

If the golden altar in the Temple, which was only covered by gold the thickness of a golden dinar, stood for many years and the fire did not burn it, for its gold did not melt, so too the sinners of the Jewish people, who are filled with good deeds like a pomegranate, as it is stated: “Your temples [*rakatekh*] are like a split pomegranate behind your veil” (Song of Songs 6:7), will not be affected by the fire of Gehenna.

Even if there are sinful Jews who appeared destined for Gehenna, the Rabbis teach that they will either repent before they enter Gehenna, or if they do not, “our father Abraham comes and raises them up and receives them. He does not leave the circumcised behind and allow them to enter Gehenna.”

We also spoke last week of the hope of Israel in the coming of the Messiah, and the relationship of the time of the Messiah with the resurrection and the World-to-Come. The Amidah prayer, which is prayed by pious Jews three times a day, has several petitions that address the hope for the Messiah.

Sound the great shofar for our freedom, raise the ensign to gather our exiles, and gather us from the four corners of the earth. Blessed are you, O Lord, who gathers the dispersed of his people Israel. Return in mercy to Jerusalem your city, and dwell in it as you have promised. Rebuild it soon in our day as an eternal structure, and quickly set up in it the throne of David. Blessed are you, O Lord, who rebuilds Jerusalem. Speedily cause the offspring of your servant David to flourish, and let him be exalted by your saving power, for we wait all day long for your salvation. Blessed are you, O Lord, who causes salvation to flourish.

As we also saw last week, the Talmud at times distinguished between the state of the world at the time of the Messiah, and the state of the World-to-Come. The sun and the moon will still lighten the time of the Messiah, whereas in the World-to-Come, “the only light will be the light of God.” This distinction is echoed by Rabbi Johanan: “All the prophets only prophesied with regard to the change in world order in the end of days with regard to the days of the Messiah. However, with regard to the World-to-Come, which exists on a higher level, it is stated: ‘No eye has seen it, God, aside from You.’” This is why Rabbi “Shmuel said: The only difference between this world and the days of the Messiah is with regard to servitude to foreign kingdoms alone. While in the days of the Messiah, Israel will be independent and free from enslavement to foreign powers, the world order will remain otherwise unchanged.” Maimonides agrees with this line of thinking in the Talmud.

In the future, the Messianic king will arise and renew the Davidic dynasty, restoring it to its initial sovereignty. He will build the Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel. Then, in his days, the observance of all the statutes will return to their previous state. We will offer sacrifices, observe the Sabbatical and Jubilee years according to all their particulars as described by the Torah. Anyone who does not believe in him or does not await his coming, denies not only the statements of the other prophets, but those of the Torah and Moses, our teacher.

Maimonides does not link the coming of the Messiah with the resurrection of the dead, for during this time the world will still operate according to natural laws. “One should not presume that the Messianic king must work miracles and wonders, bring about new phenomena in the world, resurrect the dead, or perform other similar deeds. This is definitely not true.” In fact, Maimonides sees no essential relation between the age of the Messiah and the time of the resurrection, for “the Almighty, at the time of His choice, will resurrect those He wishes to resurrect, whether during the era of the Messiah or before him or after his death.”

The text we are studying this evening was written by Maimonides to answer the objections of those who thought that he did not in fact believe in the resurrection of the dead, since in his other major writings he spent much more time teaching about the World-to-Come than he did about the resurrection. This struck his critics as being an odd contradiction, since Maimonides formulated the thirteen articles that every Jew needs to profess as true, and the final two articles concerned the Messiah and the resurrection. “The twelfth principle: The Messianic era, that is, to believe and to confirm that he will come and not to think that he is late. The thirteenth principle: The Revival of the dead, and we have already elucidated it.” Maimonides emphatically rejects the claim that he denies the resurrection in favor of the World-to-Come, since no one can be a member of the people of Israel if they deny this article of faith. “This is a premise about which there is no disagreement among the nation and this (matter) requires no interpretation. It is not permissible for any religious Jew to support a man who believes the opposite.”

In the process, Maimonides shows how the teaching of the resurrection rests on two passages from Daniel that cannot be interpreted allegorically: “For he said: ‘And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to reproaches and everlasting abhorrence.’ And the angel said to him: ‘As for you, go thy way till the end be, and thou shalt rest, and shalt stand up to thy lot, at the end of the days.’” As noted before, the passage from 2 Maccabees 7, involving the mother and her seven sons, cannot be cited, because the Rabbis did not accept it as canonical, since it is only found in Greek. However, by focusing on Daniel, Maimonides shows that the Talmud is giving an allegorical interpretation of all the other passages they cite in their attempt to prove the resurrection from the Torah. The case is different with Daniel: “Since we find that the words of the prophet cannot bear any meaning (but the literal one) in that it states that the soul will return to the body, the definiteness of this prophetic narrative becomes established.” However, Maimonides is also at pains to distinguish the life of embodied souls in the resurrection from the qualitatively different life of souls in the World-to-Come.

It is also apparent to us from those (Talmudic) statements that those individuals whose souls return to their bodies (after death) will eat and drink and engage in sexual intercourse and sire children and die after an extremely long life like the life which will exist during the days of the Messiah. Further, the life following which there is no death, is the life in the world to come because there are no (physical) bodies there. We firmly believe - and this is the truth which every intelligent person accepts - that in the world to come souls without bodies will exist like angels.

The reason Maimonides says he taught at greater length and in greater detail about the World-to-Come is that the resurrection is a miracle, which therefore cannot be proven rationally or explained according to the laws of nature. Life in the World-to-Come, however, is based in nature, as humans are created with immortal souls, and so life in the World-to-Come can be explored and explained by reason according to natural laws.

It is for this reason that we commented (at length) about the world to come and explained it to those who find it obscure and to show that this matter (of the world to come) is part of the natural course of events, that is to say, the immortality of the soul. On the other hand, the resurrection of the dead is one of the miracles and is absolutely explicit. This matter is (clearly) understood and needs only that we believe in it as we cited in the true narrative. It is a matter outside the laws of nature and one cannot prove it in a speculative manner.

This distinction is foundational to Maimonides' way of teaching. "We, on the other hand, strive to reconcile the Torah with human intellect and regard everything in its natural light wherever possible, unless it is self-evident therefrom that it is of miraculous connotation and cannot be interpreted at all; then we are forced to say that it is a miracle."

Maimonides goes on to address two fundamental questions which seem to challenge the truth of the resurrection of the body. On the one hand, as we saw in the first week of this term, the Hebrew Bible contains countless passages which claim that life ends in the grave, with no resurrection expected afterwards. Such passages seem to make resurrection impossible: "for instance, it is written: 'If a man die, may he live again?' It is also written: 'As the cloud is consumed and vanishes away, so he that goes down to the grave shall come up no more.'" As he notes, these clear and unambiguous descriptions of the finality of death have created great problems in the Jewish community. "Some of these (Scriptural verses) have resulted in great doubts about this fundamental principle of the resurrection of the dead. Even some of those who (fully) believe in this fundamental principle have been forced to explain each of these aforementioned Scriptural verses (which negate resurrection) with extremely farfetched explanations in order to render them acceptable." Clearly Maimonides is thinking of those passages in the Talmud which we read last week, which claim to find the teaching of the resurrection throughout the Hebrew Bible.

On the other hand, there is the difficulty that Moses, the greatest prophet of Israel, never taught the resurrection in the Torah. This raises the question: "why is this subject not mentioned explicitly and with such clarity that no interpretation would be needed?" as one finds in the two passages from Daniel. Maimonides claims that Moses teaches according to the laws of nature, and according to human nature, the body dies and disintegrates, never to live again. The soul, however, is immortal and does not die. Maimonides claims that both teachings are found in the Torah of Moses.

Man alone is endowed with a measure of Godliness and, therefore, of necessity, (this) part of him remains and does not perish nor become lost. However, the body of man perishes like all other living beings. A person who searches vigorously into these deep matters can also provide evidence from searching proofs on this subject, that is to say the immortality of the soul. This is something which is part of nature and this is what the books of prophecy call the soul or the spirit in partnership with God. And the perishing of the body and its return to the elements from which that species was formed is as stated in Scriptures: “And the dust returneth to the earth as it was, and the spirit returneth unto God who gave it.” This is the law of nature.

Why then did Moses clearly teach the mortality of the body and the immortality of the soul, but not the resurrection of the body? According to Maimonides, the credibility of a miracle like the resurrection entirely depends on accepting the credibility of prophecy, for only a prophet can proclaim a future miracle. It took Israel a very long time to accept prophecy to the point that God thought they could be taught the resurrection. “The matter continued this way until this basic tenet became accepted and verified after the passage of generations. And there remained no doubt about the (truth of) the prophecies of the prophets nor about the occurrence of miracles. After that, the prophets narrated to us that which they were told by the Almighty concerning the resurrection of the dead and it became easy to accept it.” Hence the two verses in the prophecy of Daniel, which arises very late in Israel’s history.

Maimonides insists that miracles cannot change the laws of nature, and hence they do not last the way natural laws do. Since even resurrected bodies are mortal by nature, after they are raised from the dead and judged by God with the soul, they will die again, and the immortal soul of the righteous will live for eternity in the World-to-Come. Thus, when one of the Sages declares, “In the world to come, there is neither eating, drinking, nor sexual relations. Rather, the righteous will sit with their crowns on their heads and delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence,” Maimonides takes this to mean that “In the world to come, there is no body or physical form, only the souls of the righteous alone, without a body, like the ministering angels. They will comprehend the truth of Godliness which they cannot grasp while in a dark and humble body.” This alone “will be life which is not accompanied by death and good which is not accompanied by evil.” “This is the reward above which there is no higher reward and the good beyond which there can be no [greater] good. This was [the good] desired by all the prophets.”