

Shabbat Chol haMo'ed Pesach: Bringing Life to the Dead

A number of years ago a friend gave me a copy of Mordecai Kaplan's "reconstructed" Shabbat Siddur of 1945. I was particularly struck by the statement in the introductory essay that, "If prayer is to be genuine and not merely a recital of words, the worshiper must, of course, believe in God." By including the words "of course," Kaplan seems to be discouraging us from questioning this claim or attempting to analyze it, but that is just what I propose to do today. Is Kaplan's claim true? If so, then how can we as people of the modern world believe in, for example, the miracles of the exodus story, or in the resurrection of the dead? Many of us have admitted to being atheists. Is it possible for an atheist to believe in God? My answer is "yes," to all three questions: I agree with Kaplan that in order to pray sincerely one must believe in God, I believe in the exodus from Egypt and in the resurrection of the dead, and I will demonstrate that it is possible for an atheist to believe in God.

First, however, let us consider today's haftarah, Ezekiel 37:1-14.

The valley...was full of bones....There were many of them and they were very dry....The Lord God said to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you will live again. I will lay sinews upon you, and cover you with flesh, and form skin over you, and I will put breath into you, and you will live again!...And they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast multitude.

Ezekiel was a priest who lived through the destruction of the First Temple and was exiled to Babylon. Chapters 34-39 are a series of stories, filled with vivid metaphor, that express his complete confidence that the exile will end and that a united nation of Israel will be resurrected from its ruin and be reestablished in a purified state.

Why is this read during Pesach? It is some of the most stirring poetry in our literature and therefore fitting as a special reading for a festival, and its message is the same as that of the exodus story: Our situation right now may be terrible, but we will survive, our nation will be reborn, and may end up even better than before. God says to Ezekiel:

These bones are the whole People of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed." Prophecy, therefore, [that] I will put breath into you and you will live again, and I will set you upon your soil.

This faith in the future, with no evidence to support it, is characteristic of Jewish Civilization and perhaps the secret to our survival.

But back to belief—I have a confession to make. When someone asks me, "Are you an atheist?" I answer "yes" and when someone asks me, "Do you believe in God?" I answer "yes." The difference is the context. "Are you an atheist?" I interpret as meaning, "Do you reject the existence of supernatural phenomena?" As a scientist, I have no patience for supernatural explanations of physically observable phenomena. Astrology, ouija boards, and the claim that requests to a supernatural being can change the course of nature are implausible and have never been verified in statistically significant experiments that could convince a skeptical observer.

"Do you believe in God?" is usually asked by people who themselves have an emotional attachment to sacred scriptures. I interpret it as meaning, "Do you have an emotional attachment to the sacred stories of the Jewish people?" I do.

The apparent contradiction is a matter of terminology. A scientist uses *I believe* in an objective sense: *I accept a particular testable hypothesis after concluding that it is the most reasonable explanation consistent with observations currently available.* This is subject to change if contradicted by other observations. Non-scientists typically use *I believe* to mean that they feel a deep emotional attachment to an idea or an image. This is a *subjective* belief. Scientists are often confused by this. I was trained as a scientist before I was trained in religion, and I had to overcome this confusion before I could feel comfortable in Jewish prayer services.

Subjective belief is quite real. Let me give an example. I recently read Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*. The characters, Anna and Alexei Karenin, Lyovin and Katya, Vronski, were portrayed so vividly that I now *know* them. Tolstoy shared with me their thoughts and emotions. I know their values, I can predict their behavior. I know them better than I know all but a few physically real people. For me, *they exist*.

Belief in God is belief in a literary figure. Knowledge of God comes from stories, not from objective observation. In this sense, I believe in God, quite sincerely. I know from our sacred stories how God wants me to behave (more or less, with help from later commentaries). I have confidence that the future will be better than the present, as promised by the prophet Ezekiel in the words of God.

I agree, at least in part, with Kaplan's pronouncement that one must believe in God for one's prayers to be meaningful. Perhaps "must" is too strong a word. However, one's prayers will have an added layer of meaning if one can enter into the sacred stories, hold them in the imagination, and feel their emotional content. The traditional Siddur text is designed to facilitate this. It is composed of direct quotes from the sacred literature and of references, direct and indirect, that resonate with the sacred stories. Reciting the prayers is a means to enter, at least temporarily, into the mythic universe of God and thereby connect with the past several thousand years of Jewish Civilization.

As an example, consider the second blessing of the Amidah prayer. Here is the traditional version:

You are mighty for all eternity, O God, resuscitator of the dead, great in deliverance. He sustains the living with kindness, He brings the dead to life with great compassion, upholding the fallen, healing the sick, freeing the captives, and keeping faith with those asleep in dust. Who compares with You, O Master of mighty deeds, who resembles You, a king Who causes fulfillment to sprout! You can be counted on to bring the dead to life. Blessed are You, O Lord, Who brings the dead to life.

This is an eloquent and beautifully poetic reference to Ezekiel's prophecy, an expression of hope and optimism that sets the stage for the subsequent blessings of the prayer. When one recites this blessing one summons into the imagination that incredible image of the bones rattling about and coming to life, with the message that rebirth and renewal are indeed possible.

The Reconstructionist Prayerbook Commission in the late 1980's decided to replace the phrase *מחיה המתים* ("brings life to the dead") with *מחיה כול חי* ("brings to life all that lives"). This removes the reference to Ezekiel, it disrupts the rhyme of the Hebrew, and it replaces a stirring call for hope with an empty platitude. Furthermore, it replaces a subjectively true metaphorical statement with an objectively false claim about the physical world. As a scientist, I know that it is *the sun* that brings life

to all that lives, by providing a source of energy to overcome entropy and thereby allow living beings to exist and reproduce. The Jewish scriptures repeatedly ridicule the notion that the sun is a god (the plague of darkness in Egypt, for example). I do not condemn sun worship. Sun worship is perfectly appropriate for the various Native American and Australian Aboriginal tribes for whom this is a part of their religious traditions. However, it is not a part of Jewish tradition. For these reasons, I continue to say **מחיה המתים** in my recital of the Amidah.

We Reconstructionists do not need to be embarrassed to admit that we believe in God and we should not be afraid of metaphorical language. Kaplan's Siddur of 1945 was a failure. The introductory essay is fascinating but his prayer services are more like a university lecture than like traditional Jewish davening, with philosophical essays replacing metaphorical poetry. Subsequent Reconstructionist Siddurim have been moving more and more back toward the traditional text, which is, in my opinion, a good thing. The *Kol Haneshamah* series, developed in the 1980's, restores much of the traditional text. *Renew our Days*, from the late 1990's restores even more, but, unfortunately, still not **מחיה המתים**.

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March, 2013