Tehiyat Hametim

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One time, not long after my ordination from rabbinical school, my late grandmother asked me if I thought she would see her loved ones who had passed, when she died. "Will I see my parents? Will I see my sisters? Will I see Grandpa?" she asked.

Well, that was a tough one. Could I explain to her that I was trained more as an historian than a metaphysicist? Thankfully, she lived for another decade after she asked me that question. But she never told me if she was satisfied with my answer.

Of course we spent some time at the Seminary discussing the question of what happens after we die, but not that much time. Not in our Talmud or history courses, which were the core of the curriculum. And it wasn't a conversation in the cafeteria or the dormitories—not that we shied away from serious conversations, or even from theology. And not that we had not experienced death together. In our third year we lost a classmate to a terrorist bomb on a Jerusalem bus. But we did not talk about what happens after we die. Modern Jews don't talk about that so much. There were only two places at the Seminary where that barrier was breached: in the Seminary synagogue where we davened the traditional words of the liturgy that assert that God resurrects the dead, and in the classroom and office of our late teacher, Rabbi Neil Gillman.

Let me share a little bit about my teacher, Rabbi Gillman. When I was in high school, Conservative Judaism published its first and only statement of principles, called *Emet ve-Emunah.* Published five years after the ordination of the first Conservative woman rabbi, the Movement recognized the need to articulate who we are and what we stand for. Our own Evelyn Auerbach was on the committee of Movement leaders who wrote this document. When it came out, I read it with great interest, and,

precocious teenager that I was, I wrote up a 15-page point-by-point response to the text. I showed it to my Hebrew high school principal and to my rabbi. My principal was very impressed. My rabbi even more so, but maybe because he was my father. My father told me to send what I wrote to Professor Gillman, who taught Jewish philosophy at the Seminary and was one of the principal authors of *Emet Ve-Emunah.* Ah, I know who Neil Gillman is, I read a really good article by him once, I said. No, my father told me, your relationship with him goes back much further. He was the kohen at your pidyon haben.

A pidyon haben is the ceremony we do for a first born boy a month after he is born, where he is symbolically "redeemed" from a kohen, exempting him from theoretical Temple service. My father was completing his education at the Seminary when I was born, and Rabbi Gillman was there to "release" me from Temple service on my thirtieth day. But something must have gone wrong, because here I was, going back to him as a teenager. He became one of my most important teachers and mentors, and I ended up in the rabbinate, serving a temple, so something obviously went wrong with my pidyon haben.

Within a week, I received a long letter from Neil Gillman, responding seriously and specifically to what I had written and sent him. I met with him numerous times in his office to talk. And then, in the summer between high school graduation and starting college at Wesleyan, I took his introduction to Jewish philosophy course that he taught during the summer session at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan. That was my first college course, and I ate up everything Dr. Gillman had to say on Torah, revelation, God, and the problem of evil in the world. I learned from him about his teachers, Mordecai Kaplan and Abraham Joshua Heschel. I learned about Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. I learned about Plato and Aristotle. I learned how to engage and critique and write my own Jewish theology. But I could not understand what he was trying to tell us about what happens after we die.

I continued my relationship with Neil Gillman when I went to college, organizing a lecture for him to deliver at Wesleyan. The most memorable part of that for me was the privilege I had as a mere college

sophomore to pick up the revered professor at his apartment on the Upper West Side, talk with him in the car for almost two hours as I drove him to Wesleyan, and then driving him home afterwards. Three years later I entered rabbinical school at the Seminary and would pop into his office whenever there was something on my mind I wanted to discuss. We knew when he was in because you could smell his pipe through the building. That was before the Seminary told him to stop smoking in his office. I used to occasionally pop in with a bottle of Glenfiddich for him. It was his favorite drink. We never hesitated to talk with him because we knew he genuinely wanted to talk with us. He loved his students. And when he didn't want to talk with us, he had no problem telling us to go away. That's how we knew that when he didn't shew us away he really wanted to talk. He was a great teacher. He never hesitated to encourage me when he thought I was brilliant, and neither did he hesitate to tell me when he thought I was not. About a dozen years ago I published an article in the Movement journal about why Conservative Jews attend high holiday services that I was pretty proud of, until I ran into Neil Gillman at the Seminary and he yelled at me out of the blue that he was very disappointed with what I wrote. Oh well. He was always honest. Honest with us, and honest with how he taught us to read the tradition.

I mentioned Evelyn Auerbach before, as she worked with Rabbi Gillman back in the eighties when she was president of Women's League. The last two times I saw my teacher I was with Evelyn, actually. Once was at a Women's League convention a few years ago that a number of us attended because Evelyn was being honored. After the dinner in her honor, Neil Gillman gave the keynote address. It may have been his last speech. He was already then quite ill. As I was walking with Evelyn and Alla and our Temple Israel contingent, we passed Rabbi Gillman in the hallway, and he had the person pushing his wheelchair stop, he looked up at me, and yelled, "David! Why don't you come visit me?"

The next time I saw him was a few months ago when Evelyn and I drove into the city together to attend Neil's funeral. I didn't really see *him* then, but maybe he would have said that I had, because he believed in the resurrection of the dead.

It's probably a good thing I did not see him between the convention and his passing, although I would have liked to and tried several times. Had I seen him one more time I would have brought him a copy of my own book on Jewish thought, *Passionate Centrism,* and had he had the chance to read it, he would have yelled at me for failing to discuss the meaning of the resurrection of the dead. Now, I hope he would have been pleased with what was in the book, but I know he would have critiqued me for what was not.

I probably should have addressed that question in the book. But it is a very difficult question to address. The committee that wrote *Emet Ve-Emunah,* the platform of Conservative Jewish beliefs in 1988, could not agree on any one take. This is what they wrote:

> For the individual human being, we affirm that death does not mean extinction and oblivion. This conviction is articulated in our tradition in the two doctrines of the bodily resurrection of the dead and the continuing existence, after death and through eternity, of the individual soul.
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> In the course of our history, both of these doctrines have been understood in widely varying ways. For some of us, they are literal truths which enable us to confront death and the death of our loved ones with courage and equanimity. Others understand these teachings in a more figurative way. The doctrine of resurrection of the dead, omnipresent in our liturgy, affirms in a striking way the value Judaism accords our bodily existence in our concrete historical and social setting. Beyond this, we know that our genetic make-up will persist through our progeny, long after our deaths and as long as humankind survives.
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> The doctrine of the immortality of the soul affirms that our identities and our ability to touch other people and society does not end with the physical death of our bodies. Great personalities from the beginning of history remain potent influences in the world. On a more personal level, our friends and the members of our families who are gone are still palpably alive for us to this day [pp. 29-30].

That about covers all the options. But we also see that our tradition never had one answer. The two big ideas, that our souls are immortal and that our bodies will be resurrected at the end of days, are two very different ideas. Or at least until they were crudely synthesized with the theory that our souls live on without the body until the time of resurrection when body and soul are reunited. Maimonides, the greatest Jewish thinker in history, is generally understood to have denied the doctrine of resurrection

until he faced so much pressure from traditionalists that he had to include it as the thirteenth of his thirteen articles of faith. We sang it last night in the Yigdal: מתים יחיה א-ל ברוב חסדו, that God will resurrect the dead in great mercy. *Emet Ve-Emunah* suggests that both resurrection and immortality of the soul might be understood literally or figuratively. That, in a physical sense, resurrection could be understood as the permanence of our DNA or other life matter. Or that in a spiritual sense, the essence of who we are lives on among the people with whom we built relationships, and with the good deeds we fulfilled. The menu of options is complete with the exception of the idea of reincarnation. That did not make the cut, although a very respected liberal Conservative rabbi from southern California did publish a book arguing that we take reincarnation seriously. That is in fact a Hasidic idea. But as I confessed on Rosh Hashanah, I have been generally allergic to Hasidism.

"You can't ignore the idea of the resurrection of the dead" Professor Gillman would implore us. It is all over the prayer book, not just the Yigdal. Every Amidah concludes the second benediction praising God as מחיה המתים, for giving life to the dead. Those words will have been said over the course of Yom Kippur nine times. Modern Judaism has wrestled with that, or rather, has avoided it. Reform and Reconstructionist prayer books changed the text to מחיה הכל, praising God instead for giving life to all. Although the current Reform prayer book gives the traditional "who gives life to the dead" as an alternative. Even the Conservative liturgy, while maintaining the traditional Hebrew, used to translate it interpretively as "Master of Life and Death." Our new mahzor and prayer book, *Lev Shalom,* has returned to a literal translation, in part influenced by Neil Gillman who insisted that we confront the traditional text honestly. But of course, *Lev Shalem* gives all kinds of interpretations in the margins, most of which Neil Gillman would have dismissed.

Always a bit of a modern skeptic myself, I early on was attracted to the idea that immortality means that we leave behind a legacy. I remember once, again in my precocious high school days, I was sitting in the back seat of our car while my father was talking in the front with a somewhat New Age

psychologist friend of ours about how we understand the afterlife. I offered my what I thought was an enlightened view, to be quickly shot down by our friend who said that was shallow and unhelpful. Maybe it wasn't what he needed, but it worked for me. Twice in my life I felt like I smelled the hint of the scent of the paradise of eternal life. The first time was when I became a parent. And the second time was when my doctoral dissertation was accepted. I was leaving behind progeny and I was leaving behind my best ideas. But Rabbi Gillman wrote the book on the afterlife, and in that book he does not like that idea either.

His book is called *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought.* In it, he summarizes the long career of this idea through the history of Jewish thought, and his basic argument is that the primary purpose of religion is to defeat death. That is the ultimate power of God, which is why the prayer acknowledging that appears in the benediction praising God's might. But the thing you have to understand about Rabbi Gillman's approach to theology is that he did not take things literally. He was the iconic Conservative rabbi in that he taught us to embrace the traditional liturgy and observances but to critique their literal meanings and understand them figuratively. In a key passage in the book he writes:

> The surest way to trivialize any eschatological doctrine is to understand it as literal truth, as a prediction of events that will take place just as they are described in some eventual future. That is the fatal flaw in the arguments, both of modern traditionalist and modern liberal Jews. The former accept it as literally true; the latter reject it because they understand it in the same way. But is there a middle ground? [pp. 249-50]

What he is saying there is that the problem with the traditionalists is that they understand the idea of resurrection of the dead *literally,* and they believe it, while the problem with the liberals is that they understand the idea of resurrection of the dead *literally,* and they do not believe it. Is there a way for us to keep the traditionalist liturgy but find a non-literal meaning for it, he asks? His answer:

> I believe there is. I believe that the most fruitful way of making sense of these teachings is to understand them as part of Judaism's classic religious myth [ibid.].

Gillman loved the word "myth." A myth is not false, he would tell us. A myth is a figurative truth. Like the story of George Washington confessing to having cut down a cherry tree. Unlikely that it actually

happened, and irrelevant, because the truth it teaches is that our founding president was a paragon of honesty and integrity. (Yes, that used to be important.) So with the idea of resurrection of the dead, our teacher would tell us that it is a myth, but a true and essential myth, and a basic myth of Judaism that should not be ignored. Don't water it down so that it loses its potency, he begged us. Understand that we need to pray to a God Who has power over death. That that is what makes God God. Faith has meaning because it imagines that our lives have meaning beyond our deaths. Rabbi Gillman tried to get us to move beyond our critiques of literal ideas. Okay, he would say, so you don't really believe that bodies will be reconstituted and walk the earth again. That is understandable. But you can still believe it when you pray it. He called this, borrowing the term from the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, a second naivete. Or as I found it phrased in a recent work by the cultural historian Thomas Lacquer, "a disenchanted enchantment" [*The Work of the Dead,* p. 210]. We have applied our critical thinking, but then we return to that which we have critiqued, jumping back in. The water is not as scary the second time. We are no longer afraid of drowning. But we can still imagine.

We would argue with him like this: So what do we mean, Rabbi Gillman, when we pray if these ideas are just myths?

Don't say just myths. Say that they are not merely literal ideas. They are mythic!

So what do we mean then, Rabbi Gillman? To what does the imagery of the liturgy refer?

They are symbols. They refer to ideas, to hopes, to faith.

So explain to us then, Rabbi Gillman, what they are.

Hah hah, he would laugh at us and smile, *If I could explain that then we would have no need for mythic language!*

Don't worry. Professor Gillman always left us a little more confused than we were before. But his teaching on the resurrection of the dead, his Torah on that, is something I still wrestle with. I still like my more rationalist approach, that we live on through our children, our students and our good deeds. As I said before, completing my doctoral dissertation, and then getting it published, was a kind of spiritual experience for me, because I knew that I left my best ideas and research on the record for others to read, and that through those pages I would continue to speak even after I am gone. It is not easy to complete a doctorate, especially once you have a family and a job. The person most responsible for my completion of the ordeal was Alla, who never lost faith in me. The other person whom I credit is Rabbi Gillman. He told me many times that no matter what else happens to me, I must finish my PhD. It in part fear in how disappointed he would be in me if I failed to complete it, that kept me going.

But yet, he wanted to teach us more. He wanted me, he wanted all of his students, to understand how important that a theology of death was. Maybe he had to die in order for me to start thinking more about what he meant. I reread his words on all of this, where he writes about what his death means to him, and it has so much more meaning to me now, now that he is speaking from the side of eternity. And yet, again, he lives for me through my memories of him, and through his printed words.

But wouldn't it be nice if I could jump into his mythic language. Wouldn't it be nice if there is something after, if God defeats death and carries us into paradise. Are we even allowed to think that, without denying our critical enlightened and rational faculties? Yes we are, Rabbi Gillman taught us, and yes we can. And as I reflect back on a lifetime of relationship with that grumpy but extraordinary teacher, I see that he taught me how to do so in a very personal way. He was the harshest and cruelest of critics. And not just the time he yelled at me in the hallway for publishing what he thought was a stupid article and then walked away without giving me even the opportunity to respond. There were many times when he rejected my ideas, deflated my hopes, even critiqued my choices in professional and personal life. But despite his criticisms, he always believed in me. From the time that I was a precocious teenager thinking

I had something important to say, until only eight years ago when my dissertation was accepted, confirming that I did have something important to say. He saw all my faults and weaknesses. And he never lost faith in me. Can we approach the words in our praybooks that way? Can we approach them critically and honestly, but still believe in them?

So what did I say to my grandmother when she asked me what happens? Did I think she would see her parents, her sisters, her husband again?

“I don’t know, Grandma,” I said, “I don’t know. But it would be nice.”

It would be nice if I could see her again too.