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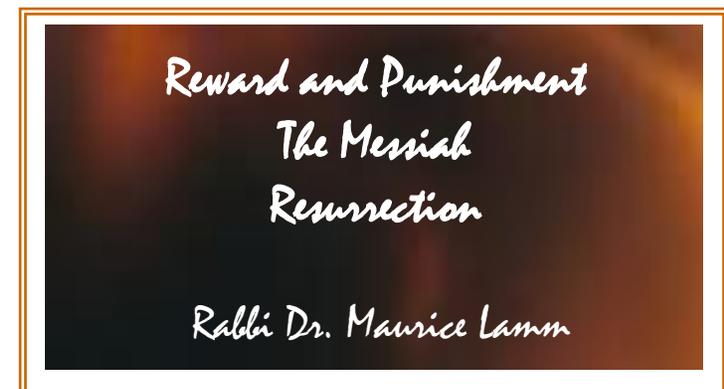
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NIJH Jewish Hospice Manual

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Introduction

As a person ages and grows closer to that time of passage from this world, it is a good time to be contemplative and think about spiritual matters. As a person reflects on his/her life and his/her accomplishments, there are three traditional Jewish beliefs that are particularly meaningful at this time. They are; Reward and Punishment, the Messiah, and the physical Resurrection of the body.

Jews for two-millennia held these beliefs to be incontrovertible, fundamental, even undeniable as articles of faith. Maimonides, in the thirteenth century, was the first to formalize and codify ancient Jewish beliefs. He held that these three concepts were among the thirteen basic beliefs of Judaism. In the fourteenth century, Hasdai Crescas revised Maimonides formulation of the basic truths but still kept reward and punishment, the Messiah and immortality as part of them. In the fifteenth century when Simon ben Zerah Duran reduced the basic number, and still later, when philosopher Joseph Albo revised the basic concepts again, they retained these three beliefs as fundamental to the faith.

In Nazi Germany, hundreds of thousands of Jews, packed in cattle-cars headed for the crematoria, sang the old hymn, "I Believe in the Coming of the Messiah." Philosopher Herman Cohen has observed that "If the Jewish religion had done nothing more for mankind than proclaim the Messianic idea of the Old Testament prophets, it could have claimed to be the bedrock of all the world's ethical culture" (cited by Levinthal, 1935).

Despite the unwavering stability of these ideas, the preponderance of Jews today do not understand these concepts, let alone appreciate their history. This may be a lingering effect of the efforts made by post emancipation rationalist Jewish philosophers in their rebellion against ancient and medieval thinking. They convinced many that the sole emphasis of Judaism is on this-worldliness, not sullied or compromised by metaphysical ruminations of a hereafter in any form.

Surveying the major thinkers, however, one can say with confidence that the vast majority of Jews in every age have believed in reward and punishment, in some form of life after death, the resurrection of the physical body, and the immortality of the soul.

Here is a brief overview of those beliefs;

Reward and Punishment

Judaism, as a moral code, has as its foundation that man has freedom of choice in his actions, and the responsibility for the consequences of his choices. When we choose the right moral choice and it brings goodness to others, there is a reward for that. And when we choose wrongly and bring pain and suffering to others, there is punishment for those choices as well. Reward and punishment can take place in this world, as well as in the next world after death.

Most of us have lived lives of goodness, and brought happiness and support, comfort and caring to our families, friends, communities and those in need. We can look back and be proud of our life

The afterlife has not been “thought up.” It is not a rational construction of a religious philosophy that has been imposed on believers. It has sprung from within the hearts of masses of men and women, a sort of consensus genium, inside out, a hope beyond and above the rational, a longing for the warm sun of eternity. On this view, the afterlife is not a theory to be proven logically or demonstrated by rational analysis. It is axiomatic. It is to the soul what oxygen is to the lungs

As we come closer to the juncture of life and death, it is imperative to understand that according to these traditional Jewish beliefs, we are really at a juncture of life and life, and that we will be responsible and answerable for the choices we made in our life, and that our life is part of a larger mission of bringing perfection to the world, and we will be resurrected back into the perfect world. With these thoughts and beliefs in mind, we can approach this major life event of death with preparation and tranquility.



During the second commonwealth, the belief in the resurrection of the body, in contradistinction to the immortality of the soul, is documented as a fundamental of Jewish belief. By the time of its redaction, the Mishna records: "He who says there is no resurrection of the dead will have no share in the world to come" (Sanhedrin 10:1). Maimonides codified this as a never-to-be-denied-component of the faith.

A cluster of uniquely Jewish concepts emerge from this understanding of resurrection. A human being's ultimate destiny is not in his or her hands alone, by virtue of his or hers immortal soul. It is an act of God's mercy to revive humans after they have slept in the dust. Judaism does not address a disembodied soul, but a whole person; salvation is not a private enterprise, but a corporate redemption of all humans. The body has value as a creation of God, and not only as a housing for the spirit: life on earth has value.

Conclusion

Jews have long had an abiding faith in a world beyond the grave (Lamm, 1969). The conviction in a life after death – unprovable but unshakeable – has been cherished since the beginning of thinking humanity's life on earth. It makes its appearance in religious literature not as commanded irrevocably by an absolute god, but as though it has been growing and developing naturally in the soul. The belief then sprouts forth through prayer and hymn. Only later does it become extrapolated in complicated metaphysical speculation.

accomplishments. However, we were certainly human beings and made our share of mistakes. We can choose to fix those mistakes - but only when we are still alive. The words of love unspoken to a spouse, a parent estranged from a child, business partners we quarreled with – these are only some examples of situations that we can stretch out our hand to those people and correct now, but only now while we are still alive.

There are also things that we could have accomplished for the greater good, if we had been more focused on that as a goal. Our priorities in life should include; family, friends, Jews in need, Israel, and the needs of our community, both our local Jewish community and the broader community in which we live. Sometimes life is so complicated and busy that we can get caught up in the day-to-day of our own personal life, and we do not focus on how to help others – both individuals and community. This contribution to the greater good is also something that can be rectified now, through one's own efforts, through encouraging family members to become so involved or by naming organizations committed to the greater good as beneficiaries in your will.

All of these are the unfinished business of our lives and we should strive to conclude all our business before our time comes. Jewish tradition has two customs that are powerful tools in this regard. The first is the "Viduy" Prayer, the prayer traditionally said before the time of death. One of the things in this prayer is that their death should be an atonement for all their sins. Another ancient Jewish custom is an Ethical will, in which a person reviews the principles he built his

life upon, and his accomplishments based on those principles, and provides ethical directives for his children.

The Messiah

The generic term Messiah means “anointed one.” Kings and priests were anointed in ancient times to set them apart from the common person. This specialness was also applied to the spiritual leadership of a descendant of the house of David. The anointed one will bring redemption to this world. It will then be a time of true bliss unparalleled in our own existence. It will not be a new world, a qualitatively different world – rather, it will be this world brought to perfection. Universal peace, tranquility, lawfulness, and goodness will prevail, and all will acknowledge the unity and lordship of God.

The traditional outlook of Judaism is that the Messiah will be the dominating figure of an age of universal peace and plenty. Through a restored Israel, he will bring about the spiritual regeneration of humanity, when all will blend into one brotherhood to perform righteousness with a perfect heart: “On that day, the Lord shall be One, and His name One” (Zechariah 14:9). Jewish prayers are replete with references to the messianic hopes and aspirations. There is hardly a prophet of note who does not mention Messiah and the messianic age.

Will the Messiah be a specific person, or will he only represent an era of perfection – “*yemot ha’Mashiach*”, the “days of the Messiah? Traditional Judaism believes

in the coming of a flesh-and-blood mortal sent expressly by God to complete the mission of His people. The traditional belief is that people must strive to better the world and by these efforts help bring the Messiah. The personal Messiah, supernaturally introduced to humanity, will not be a divine personality as in Christianity. He will herald a redemption granted by God, but the Messiah will have no ability to fabricate that redemption himself. He will have no miraculous powers; he will not be able to atone for the sins of others; he will have no superhuman relationship with God. Instead, he will be an exalted personality of incomparable spiritual ability who will begin the rehabilitation of the Jewish people and the subsequent regeneration of humanity.

Although some modern theologians have disputed the idea of a supernatural introduction of the Messiah and the idea of a personal Messiah, there is however, a two-millennia tradition that affirms that position – despite the rational analyses, let alone the metaphysical misgivings of sophisticated contemporary theologians.

Resurrection

The doctrine of Israel’s messianic redemption is integrally entwined with that of resurrection. The belief that God “opens your graves and bring you out of your graves” (Ezekiel 37:12) is presumed throughout the Bible, expressing itself through figures of speech and metaphors that imply the power of God and even the power of the prophets to revive the dead. It is most eloquently expressed by Ezekiel in his vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones.