

Yizkor Yom Kippur 5779

Reclaiming *Mechayeh Ha-Meitim*

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Mechayeh is one of those great Yiddish words that occasionally comes up in casual conversation among Jewish people in the know. If, after a day *schvitzing* in sweltering heat and humidity, you walk into an air-conditioned room, or dip your feet in a swimming pool, or take the first sip from a glass of ice water, you might say, “Ah, what a *mechayeh*.” When you taste the kugel tonight after more than 24 hours of fasting, or when you finally take off your heels after coming home from your in-laws’ break-fast in Great Neck, you might say, “That’s a *mechayeh*,” literally meaning, something that has brought you back to life after having died, or, colloquially, anything refreshing or revitalizing.

Rabbi Julian Sinclair observes that the phrase may reflect a Jewish penchant for “dramatic self-expression, where others might simply say, that was nice.” We say, “What a *mechayeh*.”

Mechayeh derives from the Hebrew *chai*, meaning life (as in “*L’Chayim*”). It’s a verb form of *chai* - something best translated as “to give life” or “to enliven.” The Hebrew pronunciation is מַחִיָּה. It’s

actually a word that comes up a lot in our prayers, specifically in the *Gevurot* prayer which, in our Reform Jewish tradition, concludes, *Baruch Ata Adonai, mechayeh ha-kol*, Blessed are You, Adonai, who gives life to all.

However, that's not how the original prayer goes, and if you grew up in a Conservative or Orthodox synagogue, or if you're paying attention to the words in parentheses in our Reform prayer book, you'll see: *Baruch Ata Adonai, mechayeh ha-metim*, Blessed are You, Adonai, who gives life to *the dead*.

It comes as a surprise to many modern-day Jews—Reform Jews especially—that the doctrine of resurrection of the dead is actually part of the Jewish tradition. In fact, no less an authority than Maimonides codified a belief in *techiyat ha-metim*, that eventually the dead will be resurrected, as the last of his Thirteen Articles of Faith.

The reason many of us remain unaware of the whole idea of bringing the dead back to life is because the Reform Movement officially spoke out against this belief more than 150 years ago, deeming it a superstitious relic of a less enlightened era. Early Reformers worked diligently to expunge such language from our prayer books and religious school curricula. But in many cases they couldn't get rid of

it entirely—so widespread and well-known were these prayers—so instead they altered the wording of the second prayer of the *Tefilah* so that the phrase *mechayeh ha-metim*, “...who gives life to the dead” becomes *mechayeh ha-kol*, “...who gives life to all.”

This service is called *Yizkor*, Remembrance, a fixed ritual that the Jewish calendar gives us four times a year in order to keep our dead before us long after they have died. The *Yizkor* of Yom Kippur, in particular, seems a good time to reflect on the meaning of *mechayeh ha-metim*, this curious and, at least in a Reform Jewish setting like ours, controversial phrase that has stirred up such strong feeling, that Jews have both embraced and rejected. Over the past year or so, I have found myself increasingly drawn to the language of *mechayeh ha-metim* and have restored it to my personal prayer practice. And I want to show you why.

On her travels with the National Tour of *The Sound of Music* three years ago, Kelly picked up a bonsai plant of a Persian Desert Rose that was more than thirty years old and had been meticulously cultivated and nurtured. While driving home from a performance in Florida, with the plant safely nestled in the back seat of her Toyota, she stopped for a few hours and left the bonsai in the car. By the

time she got home, she discovered that the leaves had turned brown, burnt by the Georgia sun and withered by the greenhouse effect.

Over the coming weeks, Kelly did everything in her power to nurse the bonsai back to life, but within days, the predominantly brown leaves turned dry and brittle and many of them fell off the branches, leaving the bonsai denuded and altogether sad, as were we. I, for one, was ready to say *Kaddish* but Kelly insisted that with proper care, there was cause for hope and we should not give up so easily.



The photograph above was taken earlier this summer. It is one of the reasons I now say *mechayeh ha-metim*, because I want to acknowledge that in God's world, regeneration is possible, new life and growth is possible, and everywhere in Nature we can see life and

death not as a finite line but rather as an infinite circle, one leading to the other and back again—forever.

Mechayeh ha-metim has other metaphorical meanings, too. The *Shulchan Aruch*, the most extensive code of Jewish law, instructs us to recite *Baruch Ata Adonai, Mechayeh Ha-Metim* when we are reunited with a dear friend after twelve or more months without contact. I imagine some of us, without even knowing, have had cause to recite this blessing upon entering the sanctuary these Holidays, as we reconnect with members of our extended WRT family whom we haven't seen since last year. And how beautiful is that? I love that the Jewish tradition likens the experience of human connection and re-connection to the resurrection of the dead. How powerfully it reminds us that human contact is precious, that welcoming people back into your life after a long time apart is a kind of rebirth, that renewing a relationship gives life and sustains life.

We have spent these High Holidays grappling with the terrible realities of life and death—coming to terms with a year that, for reasons beyond our ken, took more than it gave, sundered us from so many. In our congregation, we have laid to rest not only the aged, sated in years and crowned with blessing, but also the much too young, claimed by insidious disease, self-inflicted harm, accidents

and just plain bad luck. Every heart in this room beats with love and longing for our own family members and cherished friends with whom we can never share a long-awaited reunion. Every heart in this room is heavy, carrying the shared burden of our congregational family's losses.

As we approach the closing of the gates, the exquisite *Ne'ilab* service suffused with the light of the setting sun, as we gather at this *Yizkor* hour, with empty bellies and heavy hearts, with eyes that have done their share of weeping, might we yet be moved to acknowledge the possibility of life after death, life in the face of death, life for the sake of our dead?

Could we say, *Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheimu Melech Ha-Olam, Mechayeh Ha-Meitim*: Blessed is the Power that fills the Universe, that brings life into the world, that gives us the power to live even when we mourn our dead?

Blessed is the Source of Life, that gives our dead the power to live every time we share their words, every time we are reminded of their kindness and generosity of spirit, every time we remember how the world was forever changed because they were here....

Blessed is the Source of Life, that carries the DNA and the wisdom of our ancestors inexorably forward....

...That implants the power of life within the seed, that falls to the earth encased in the dying fruit, that itself nourishes the earth, that gives rise to a new tree....

...That brings us light from distant stars long after they have met their deaths in a supernova of energy, an explosion that sends forth into space all the elements of the known universe, among them the hydrogen and oxygen and carbon that comprise all that lives and breathes on earth....

...That gives hurting human souls the power to heal, to turn our wounds and our losses and all our sources of pain into gifts of love....

...That gives us the ability to give life to our dead by championing the causes they cherished, and cherishing all the more the living whom they so loved in life....

For all these, we say *Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam, Mechayeh Ha-Meitim*: Blessed are You, Eternal Source of Life:

Who renews hope and possibility where once we felt only despair
and yearning;

Who renews us to life even when we grieve our dead;

Who renews our dead unto life, in our hearts, in the world, and in
eternity.