

Sermon for Yizkor and Aufruf

Shavuot 5766 (2006)
Rabbi Noah Gradofsky

Today, we'll start with a question. What does Judaism say about the afterlife? What is it like? I'll tell you what. I have a bible here. Just tell me what page I should turn to to read about it (leaf through Bible). Which prophet . . . what part of the writings? Isaiah? Proverbs? Where is it . . . Should we go back to my office and take out the Talmud? What tractate?

OK. Maybe I'm not being fair. After all, I'm the Rabbi. Maybe I should tell you. But, you see, I really don't have an answer to the question. Truth is, the Bible and Talmud do not have a description of the afterlife. There is no Dante's Inferno . . . no pearly gates. In fact, in my years of study - through grade school, high school, college, and rabbinical school, we spent very little time talking about the afterlife.

How can this be. Does Judaism not believe in the afterlife? Well, no. There are enough references to the afterlife in the Bible. The Rabbis often enough discuss what kind of behavior leads someone to merit a place in the world to come. So, clearly Judaism believes in the afterlife. It's just that we don't spend that much time discussing it. You see, Judaism is a religion about life. A while ago some students in our Basic Judaism class were very surprised when I didn't have too much to say when they asked me about the afterlife. But, I explained: "You see, there is so much to learn about this world, and what is expected of us in this world, that it doesn't leave to much time to think about the afterlife. Judaism is a religion of life.

And so, it is very disappointing when I hear a story like the one that was told to me by Rabbi Eli Goodman at the Bach synagogue in Long Beach. He told me that he recently brought some children into the synagogue to show them what it was about. As he entered, one of the children exclaimed, "WOW! Is this the place that you pray for dead people?" . . . Is this the place where we pray for dead people . . .

Well, yes, as it happens, we remember and pray for loved ones who are no longer with us. But this is not what this place is about. This is a place where we come to think about how best to live our lives.

An example of how Judaism is obsessed with life comes from the first time that the Bible really talks about death. This is the story of the death of our first matriarch, Sarah. But when the Bible reports to us about Sarah's passing, it first takes time painstakingly to describe her life:

וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעֵי שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:

The life of Sarah was one hundred years . . . and twenty years . . . and seven years, the years of the life of Sarah.

Genesis 23:1 בראשית כג:א (*Ellipsis added for dramatic purposes*)

The verse draws out the account of Sarah's years of life, as if to tell us to concentrate on these, before it tells us finally:

וַתָּמָת שָׂרָה בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע הוּא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֵא אַבְרָהָם לְסַפֵּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכְתָּהּ:
And Sarah died in Kiryat Arbah, which is Chevron, in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to cry for her.
בראשית כג:ב

After briefly telling us that Sarah passed away, the Torah returns to the living, telling us about Abraham's behavior when Sarah passed away. Then, the Bible simply moves on to the story of Abraham and his servant looking for a wife for Isaac.

Another example of how Judaism is a religion of life, comes from looking at the role of the Jewish priest, the כֹּהֵן (*Kohen*). For instance, in ancient Egyptian culture, one of the main purposes of an Egyptian priest was to perform death ritual. There is an "Egyptian Book of the Dead" which talks about all those rituals. The Egyptian priest would even weigh the heart of the dead person, in order to see if that person would pass on to the afterlife. Do you know what the bible tells the כֹּהֵן to do about death ritual? **Absolutely nothing!** In fact, unless the deceased were a close relative, or someone that the כֹּהֵן chanced upon and there was no one else to bury them, a כֹּהֵן was not allowed to touch, or be in the same building with a dead body. As if to say to the priests: We are a religion obsessed with life, not with death. As ministers of the Jewish religion, you will serve the living. (I first heard this idea presented eloquently by Rabbi Stephen Golden).

I think this is an idea that we should take with us as we enter the Yizkor service. Yes, we are here to pray about the memory of the loved ones whom we have lost. But we should make that prayer less about sense of loss of the loved one, and more about their inspiration for our lives. As the Torah spent so much time tellings us about Sarah's life, let us think about the lives of our dearly departed. What were their greatest qualities? What did they do in life, that we would like to emulate in ours? What acts of charity did they perform? What good deeds? How can we honor them, by continuing their legacy in our lives?

We should also think about what we can do to make sure that our Judaism is one simply about praying for dead people. It is important that the next Yizkor not be our next religious experience. The synagogue should not just be a palace we come to pray for dead people. The synagogue is a place for us to search for spirituality, to reflect on our lives, and to find inspiration for the future. It is a place for us to connect with God, and to connect with humanity. It is a place for us to learn how we are supposed to live our lives - to learn not only about ritual behavior, but how to live just and moral lives.

I talked earlier about how the Bible quickly goes from telling us that Sarah passed away to the continuing story of Abraham's life, and his work on finding Isaac a wife. As it happens, at the end of that story, the Torah returns one more time to a mention of Sarah's passing, when it says:

וַיְבִיֵאֵה יִצְחָק הָאֵהֳלָה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי-לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּאָהֲבָהּ וַיִּנְחָם יִצְחָק אֶחָרֵי אִמּוֹ.

And Issac brought her to the tent of Sarah his mother, and took Rivkah, and she was a wife for him, and loved her, and Isaac was comforted after his mother.

בראשית כד:67

There are many rabbinic מדרשים (midrashim, rabbinic legend/homily) that ask what it is that Rebecca did to comfort Issac for the loss of his mother. One mirsah says that every Friday, Sarah used to light a candle in the tent. When Sarah passed away, that light was no longer there. When *Rivkah* came into the tent, she began to light that candle again. The point is clear: in the face of the loss of his mother, Issac was comforted by the idea that the traditions of his home would continue. And it is with this idea that we move from our sense of sadness for those we miss, to our sense of hope and elation at the wedding we celebrate.

Nathaniel and Jessica, you represent our hope for the future. We are overjoyed to see two Jewish people come together to create a new Jewish family. We pray that you will be privileged to build a Jewish family. WE pray that your home will be a home in which the spirit of Shabbat illuminates your week. We pray that Judaism will be a guiding force in your life, helping you find spirituality and meaning. Helping you to learn how to live lives of spirituality, charity and ethics. May your home be a home that shines with the traditions of your parents, grandparents, and all your ancestors - continuing the spirit of life that embodies our Jewish faith.