

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch Acharei Mot 22 “After Death”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. This week’s parsha tells us about the Yom Kippur service, which originally was performed on the first day of the Mishkan’s dedication, and only later became the Yom Kippur service. For some reason, our parsha starts this service off by telling us about the 2 sons of Aaron who died during the inauguration of the mishkan. While this was certainly a traumatic event for the Jewish people, it was already recounted in Parshat Shemini and expressed there at length, so what’s the point of making another quick reference to it? Why do we need to rehash the trauma of this event?

I think we can find the answer in another passage in our parsha, the acclaimed term *v’chai bahem you should live with them*, meaning to live with the mitzvot; that life holds priority over all other mitzvot, except for the big 3: murder, idolatry, and adultery, and also for kiddush hashem, those who choose to give up their life for the sanctification of God’s name. The deeper message of this mitzvah of *v’chai bahem* is that Torah is about **eternal** life. In our world, we know that everything dies, but the pasuk is teaching us that there is more to life than this world, that there is a world to come; there is *tecchiyat hameitim*, the resurrection of the dead.

We see a hint to this idea regarding an increasingly popular practice performed in preparation for this Shabbat, the first one to follow Pesach, with the custom to bake a Schlissel

challah, which is a challah baked with a physical key inside of it, or alternatively in the shape of a key.

As we've explained before, one interpretation of this custom may be based on the Gemara in Mesechet Ta'anit 2a:

**אמר ר' יוחנן ג' מפתחות בידו של הקב"ה שלא נמסרו ביד שליח ואלו
הן מפתח של גשמים מפתח של חיה מפתח של תחיית המתים...
הם במערבא אמרי אף מפתח של פרנסה**, *there are 4 aspects of life which are ultimately in the hands of God. The Vilna Gaon devised a clever acronym for this Gemara; maphteach, which is the Hebrew word the gemara uses that means key. The mem stands for matar, rain; the pey is for parnasa, earning a living; the tav is for t'chiat hameitim/resurrection of the dead; and the chet stands for chaya/childbirth.*

These are the 4 spheres to which God alone holds the key, and each is an expression of resurrection; in other words, the recreation of life. Pregnancy is a miracle we take for granted, but it entails a life springing from sources which have no life of their own. Rain is also a symbol of life, and earning a living means to generate income where none existed. The 4th sphere, of course, is the actual resurrection of the dead.

So that's I think why the Parsha mentions the 2 sons of Aaron and why our parsha is named after the incident of their deaths: *Acharei Mot/After death*, in a deeper sense refers to the fact that there is an Afterlife, there is life after death. If we can connect to God, who we know is infinite, we will have a path to infinite life.

This belief is also expressed through Yom HaShoah, which we observed this past week, and this coming week, when we observe Yom Hazikaron and Yom Haatzma'ut. All these days are symbolic of the Jewish people coming back to life even when they were left for dead. Whether it be from the Holocaust or the countless pogroms that we've experienced in exile, or the threats we still face in the land of Israel and across the globe, we've somehow remained resilient. We not only survived, we thrived. That spirit stems from our connection to God, who helps us come back to life.

My step-grandmother Frania Goldhar was the only one in her family who survived the Holocaust. She moved to Israel after the war and was one of the founders of the city of Yoqneam in Northern Israel. She always said that seeing her grandson Dudi Zohar become an officer in the Israeli air force was her revenge against the Nazis for what they did to us. Shortly after her death in 2017, my cousin Dudi Zohar died in a freak helicopter accident while training other officers. A few months later, I recounted their story in my benediction at the ZOA Gala. When I traveled to Israel the next year for the Jerusalem marathon, I visited her daughter, who was still devastated by the loss of her mother and son in the same year. She's never been a religious woman, but despite her devastation, she repeatedly echoed the words she always heard from my grandmother: *we have hope for the future because of our belief in God.*

My other grandparents and countless other survivors endured similar experiences. Somehow, they rose from the ashes and became accomplished in so many areas of life, and many of them emerged with an unbending belief in God as well. There are still many hardships that we, along with the rest of the world, must endure to this day. We are now in between the dates of Yom Hashoa which occurred this past week and Yom Hazikaron and Yom Ha'atzmaut in the upcoming week. We must always remember the profound mantra of Jewish history that these modern holidays and our parsha teaches us: *Acharei Mot, even after death there is still life and hope for the Jewish people.* Shabbat shalom.