**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

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**Shiur #15: Resurrection of the Dead**

**Adapted by Leora Bednarsh**

What is the resurrection of the dead, and how does it fit into the scheme of ultimate reward and punishment?

As we explained in the previous *shiurim*, according to the Ramban and many other philosophers, resurrection of the dead is the mechanism for entering *olam ha-ba*. When this world ends and *olam ha-ba* takes its place, the righteous will be resurrected and will thus be alive in *olam ha-ba.* The hope and prayer of the righteous, then, is to merit resurrection and enter *olam ha-ba*.

These philosophers find evidence for the identification of resurrection with *olam ha-ba* in the *gemara*’s discussion of the *mishna* that states that one who denies resurrection has no share in *olam ha-ba* (*Sanhedrin* 90a)*.* The *gemara* explains that this punishment is appropriate based on the doctrine of reciprocity, *middah keneged midda.* Since this person denied resurrection, he will not be resurrected. This passage equates the punishment of losing *olam ha-ba* with not being resurrected, thus proving that *olam ha-ba* and resurrection are equivalent.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**The Rambam’s Position**

The Rambam’s position on this issue, however, is very unclear. He believes that the greatest pleasures can only be achieved by disembodied souls. Having a body is a disability that prevents the soul from achieving full closeness to God. Why, then, would a righteous person ever want to be resurrected? If his soul goes directly to *olam ha-ba* when he dies, then it would have to leave the ultimate bliss of *olam ha-ba* in order to be resurrected. How could leaving ultimate bliss and regaining the disability of physical existence be considered a desirable reward? This conundrum has puzzled the interpreters of the Rambam from his lifetime until this very day.

The Rambam compounded this puzzle by never explaining the details of resurrection in his classic works. In his commentary on the *mishna* (*Sanhedrin*, ch. 10), he lists it as one of the thirteen principles of faith, and he clarifies that only the righteous merit resurrection, but he does not explain any further. He lists it among the obligatory beliefs in the *Mishneh Torah* as well (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:6), but never specifies exactly when and why it happens.

**Raavad’s Understanding of the Rambam**

There are two general approaches to understanding the position of the Rambam. The Raavad (glosses to *Hilkhot Teshuva* 8:2) accuses the Rambam of maintaining that there is no such thing as physical resurrection of the dead.[[2]](#footnote-2) Other contemporary thinkers also interpreted the Rambam this way, but unlike the Raavad, they agreed with this position and preached publicly that there would be no physical resurrection, invoking the authority of the Rambam.[[3]](#footnote-3) According to this interpretation, the Rambam never explained the details of *techiyat ha-meitim* because he did not actually believe in physical resurrection. Rather, whenever *techiyat ha-meitim* is mentioned in *Tanakh* or *Chazal*, it is a metaphor for the continued existence of the soul after one’s physical death. Resurrection does not mean that the dead will come back to life, but rather that their souls will continue to live eternally in *olam ha-ba*.

**The Rambam’s Own Explanation**

The Rambam himself, however, gave a different interpretation of his peculiar relationship to the concept of resurrection throughout his writings. In *Iggeret Techiyat Ha-Meitim,* the Rambam's essay about the resurrection of the dead, he expresses surprise at the accusation that he does not believe in physical resurrection. How could he not believe in resurrection if he counted it as one of the thirteen principles of faith?! Why, then, does he not explain it thoroughly or give it prominence in his works?

The Rambam explains that resurrection of the dead is not related to ultimate reward and punishment, which is purely spiritual. Resurrection of the dead is a true belief, but it is not the ultimate goal of a human being, and it is therefore not philosophically significant. Rather, it is simply a historical event that will happen at some point, and its effects will only be temporary, as the resurrected individuals will die once again. The Rambam did not explain this concept because there is nothing to explain. A historical event, as opposed to a philosophical concept, cannot be proven or analyzed using abstract reasoning. The only relevant thing to say about a historical event is either that it happened in the past or that it will happen in the future, and that is exactly what he said in his previous writings.

**Purpose of Resurrection**

The Rambam never answered, however, the very practical question of what advantage there is to a righteous person for his soul to leave *olam ha-ba* and return to this material world to live in a physical body. A number of answers were proposed by later thinkers to explain the position of the Rambam.

The *Sefer Ha-Ikarim* (Book 4, ch. 30) suggests three explanations for the purpose of resurrection according to the Rambam.[[4]](#footnote-4) Perhaps the miracle of resurrection is not for the benefit of the one resurrected, but rather for those alive at the time – in order to bolster their faith in God. Alternatively, perhaps the righteous deserve physical reward to make up for the physical suffering they endured during their lifetimes. Since this physical reward cannot be given them in *olam ha-ba,* they are resurrected in the physical world in order to enjoy the deserved quantity of physical pleasures, before they die once again and return to their eternal spiritual bliss.[[5]](#footnote-5) Third, a repeated sojourn in the post-messianic physical world gives the righteous an opportunity to achieve spiritual goals that they were not able to achieve in their original lifetimes due to exile and persecution. Therefore, when they die once again after their second lifetime, their souls can return to an even higher level of eternal bliss in *olam ha-ba.*

Although these explanations seem reasonable, the Rambam himself gave no explanation for the necessity of resurrection. In *Iggeret Techiyat Ha-Meitim,* he does explain why he counted the doctrine of resurrection as one of his thirteen principles of Jewish belief, but his explanation does not relate to the significance of resurrection itself. He implies that it is not actually philosophically important to believe that God will resurrect the dead; rather, it is crucial to believe that God **can** resurrect the dead. It is this aspect that constitutes a principle of faith.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is not important that a Jew believe that certain people will be resurrected at a certain time and place for a certain reason. Rather, it is important to believe in the resurrection of the dead because the *Tanakh* says that God will resurrect the dead, and we accept the literal meaning of every verse in *Tanakh* so long as the literal interpretation remains within the realm of possibility.

Thus, the denial of resurrection is tantamount to a denial of the possibility of resurrection, and the belief in physical resurrection is fundamentally the belief that God has the ability to resurrect the dead. That belief is crucially important, because resurrection of the dead is the greatest miracle, and belief in resurrection thus includes belief in the possibility of miracles. There are heretics who believe that God exists, but He cannot alter the rules of physics and perform miracles. The Rambam therefore counted resurrection as the thirteenth principle of faith in order to define the belief in miracles as axiomatic to Judaism. Anyone who denies resurrection, explains the Rambam, likewise denies all miracles and believes that God cannot override the workings of nature, and this indeed constitutes a grave heresy.

According to this reading, it is possible that the Rambam had no explanation for why the dead should be resurrected, but this question did not bother him at all. Since he attributed philosophical significance only to the possibility of resurrection and not to the actual resurrection, he could comfortably accept the truth of actual resurrection based solely on the testimony of the *Tanakh* and trust that God would not resurrect anyone unless He had a good reason to do so.

**Summary**

We have seen three approaches to resurrection of the dead. The Ramban and others believe that resurrection is identical with *olam ha-ba* and that the ultimate reward is to be resurrected in your body and live eternally in a perfected physical world. The second approach is the exceedingly rationalist interpretation of the Rambam, which understands resurrection as a metaphor for the life of the soul in *olam ha-ba*. The third approach is the Rambam himself, who understands resurrection as something different from the ultimate reward of the righteous. The ultimate reward is not be resurrected, but rather to live eternally as a disembodied soul. Resurrection is merely a temporary phenomenon; those who come back to life will live in the physical world for a limited amount of time and then die and reclaim their ultimate reward in *olam ha-ba*. Within the approach of the Rambam, we developed two approaches to the significance of temporary resurrection. Either it is significant because it brings some advantage to those who are resurrected or witness the resurrection, or the belief in resurrection is significant because it represents the belief in miracles and Divine omnipotence.

1. Ramban, *Torat Ha-Adam, Sha’ar Ha-Gemul;* Yad Ramah, *Sanhedrin* 90a. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Out of respect for the Rambam, the Raavad writes merely that the Rambam’s words are close to the position that denies physical resurrection. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Rambam mentions one such preacher in the beginning of his *Iggeret Techiyat Ha-Meitim.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The first of his explanations is found earlier in Ralbag, *Milchamot Hashem*, section 6 chapter 10, and the last two are mentioned very briefly by Ramban, *Torat Ha-Adam*, *Sha’ar Ha-Gemul*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This explanation, however, is difficult in light of the Rambam’s assertion in his commentary to the *mishna* (*Sanhedrin*, ch. 10) that one who experiences spiritual bliss will have no desire for physical pleasures, which are nothing compared to the true pleasure of contemplation of the Divine. If so, then it would not be advantageous to the righteous to regain their bodies, and thus lose out on those spiritual pleasures that are not accessible from within the confines of physicality, simply in order to experience some insignificant physical pleasures. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, when denying the more radical interpretation of his earlier works, the Rambam writes that he denies and declares himself innocent of the statement that the soul will not return to its body and cannot ever do so. This implies that denial of the historicity of resurrection may not be considered heresy so long as one does not deny the possibility of resurrection. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)