

Rabbi Marci N. Bellows
Temple B'nai Torah
Yom Kippur Morning 5770

COMING BACK TO LIFE

Gut Yontuv and Shanah Tovah.

I have been resurrected.

Before you storm out in protest, aren't you dying to know what I mean by that? Why would your rabbi make such a statement? Is she trying to shock you? Why would she mention a concept that doesn't seem very Jewish? Did she die? Did she come back to life? Who does she think she is?

Well, friends, I will tell you what I mean, and I will tell you my story. I will speak to you as one adult to another, and I trust that you will receive it as such. I know that, sometimes, you need to view your rabbi in different roles: teacher, parent, and yes, even granddaughter, but today we will speak adult to adult.

I have been resurrected.

Very few of you know this – five years ago, I was in a serious car accident. I was in Chicago to see my youngest brother perform as the lead in his high school play. While on the way to pick up my grandmother, I slowed down to stop behind someone making a left turn. Unfortunately, the driver behind me never slowed down, and plowed into my car at

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50 miles an hour. I was pushed into oncoming traffic, yet, miraculously, no one was there. I called my father, who kept me calm until the police arrived. Before I knew it, an ambulance pulled up. Somehow, I was able to get up out of the crushed vehicle, and walk to the ambulance, where I was put on a backboard and driven to a local emergency room. The x-rays showed no fractures, and the doctors told me that I had a concussion, whiplash, and plenty of bruising from hitting my head on the steering wheel (when you are rear-ended, the air bag doesn't deploy).

It took me three weeks to be able to travel back to my home and my job back here in New York – I had just begun my years at Shaaray Tefila in Manhattan. Over the next three years, my physical health deteriorated steadily. My lower back began to hurt all the time. Doctors and surgeons repeatedly told me that there was nothing really wrong. Just a bulging disc. Rounds of physical therapy did nothing. I got worse and worse. At its worst, I was walking with a cane, unable to sit for long periods of time, unable to walk or stand much at all, and I felt at least 50 years older than my age.

These were dark days. Somehow, my body was still communicating that something was very wrong – and I trusted my body. I decided to start with a new set of doctors, to start over from scratch. I wasn't ready to resign myself to a life of disability. The new surgeon noticed something – something strange in my vertebrae. He told me that spinal surgery was necessary, though he wasn't totally sure what he would find – was it a congenital problem that the accident exacerbated? Or was it a now three-year-old injury?

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Apparently, when he opened me up – he did a double take. My spine was fractured in multiple places. He fused the relevant vertebrae together, cleaned it all up, and put me back together.

And now, almost two years after my surgery – I'm back. Do you see me run around, bounce, and jump as I be-bop around the synagogue? It's because I have experienced a re-birth in the first degree. I have experienced a resurrection. I'm a new person, and I'm back. Yes, ultimately, I am speaking metaphorically, yet I feel as if I have been given the gift of a new life. I am not the same person that I was before my accident, nor am I the same person I was before my surgery. I will never, ever be grateful for the injury, but I have learned much from my suffering, and even more from the profound healing that has taken place.

In fact, there's a beautiful tradition, when surviving something extraordinary, of changing your Hebrew name or adding a new name as a sign of your new identity. This is something that I haven't yet felt ready for, but maybe you will all be a part of it when I feel that the time is right. I am sure that there are some of you out there this morning who have also experienced something similar, either the same kind of hopelessness, or a similar kind of healing.

Now, why would I use the word resurrection? You may be surprised to learn that resurrection is a very old, fundamental belief in Jewish tradition. Mentions of it date back

to the Bible. There are three explicit examples in the Hebrew Bible of people being resuscitated from death:

- The prophet Elijah raises a young boy from death (1 Kings 17:17-24)
- The prophet Elisha raises the son of the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:32-37); this was the very same child whose birth he previously foretold (2 Kings 4:8-16)
- A dead man's body that was thrown into the dead Elisha's tomb is resurrected when the body touches Elisha's bones (2 Kings 13:21)

At the start of the common era, around the year Zero, Resurrection was a belief that distinguished the Pharisees (intellectual ancestors of Rabbinical Judaism) from the Sadducees, a group that focused heavily on the Torah text. The Sadducees rejected the concept, because it is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah. The Pharisees found the concept implied in certain verses,¹ such as those that discuss our forefathers being gathered unto their ancestors upon death. The belief in resurrection, at any rate, became an integral part of rabbinic tradition. It appears in a number of mentions throughout the Talmud and through midrashic legends. Saadia Gaon, 10th century Jewish philosopher, in his "Emunot v' De'ot," declared the belief in resurrection to be fundamental.² Maimonides, our great 12th century doctor, philosopher, and scholar,

¹ <http://www.jewfaq.org/olamhaba.htm>

² Read more: <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=233&letter=R&search=resurrection#ixzz0SGbD19Qm>

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made it the last of his thirteen articles of belief: "I believe with complete faith that there will take place a revival of the dead at a time which will please the Creator, blessed be God's name."

As you might guess, the belief in resurrection, as central as it was to rabbinical Judaism, became controversial once more at the outset of modernity, running up against scientific materialism on the one hand and the enlightened Christian belief only in the immortality of the soul on the other (in Christianity, of course, only one man was ever resurrected from the dead and no one else will be). Though there had been a number of references to resurrection in traditional weekday and Shabbat liturgy, Enlightened, Reform Jewish thinkers in the mid- to late- 1800s chose to remove all references to resurrection from our prayer book. This meant that the central prayer of our worship service, the Amidah, was going to undergo significant changes. Most notably, the final blessing of the Gevurot section, which traditionally concluded with the words, "*Baruch Atah Adonai, m'chayeh hameitim,*" Blessed are You, Adonai, who gives life to the dead. This blessing became, as we are all aware, "*Baruch Atah Adonai, M'chayeh Hakol*" Blessed are You, Adonai, who gives life to all. This more general formula could be interpreted in many ways, and was consonant with reform's rational view of prayer and theology. This change took place primarily in North America; In Europe, it was often retained in the Hebrew but paraphrased in the translation. Interestingly, the substitute formula *m'chayeh hakol* ("who gives life to all") first appears in Samuel Adler's 1860 revision of Leo Merzbacher's 1854 Reform prayerbook for Temple Emanuel in New York.

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Over the past few decades, a fascinating change has been taking place – more and more reform Jews have been choosing to pray the original words on their own. As liturgical scholars and rabbis joined together to create our new prayerbook, *Mishkan T'filah*, an enormous question was raised – how should the prayer be published in this latest reflection of the reform movement's theology? Impassioned discussions and debates followed – on one side, you had those who stood by the classical reform idea that dismissed any notion of resurrection as silly and unnecessary. On the other side, you had many Jews who were profoundly moved by mention of resurrection, particularly as it could be understood either metaphorically or affirmed in a transrational, transcendent fashion. *Mishkan T'filah*, in its final iteration, includes both the traditional and the revised formulas, allowing worshippers to make their own choices.³

What a great example of the progressive, evolving nature of Reform Judaism. If you are surprised to hear that Reform leaders would make such a large change, consider Reform's original view of Zionism. The earliest platforms of the Reform Movement, published in late 1800's, were decidedly Anti-Zionist, and our leadership felt no connection whatsoever to the land of Israel. The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 stated, "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state."⁴

³ THE *T'FILAH*: SECOND BENEDECTION: *G'VUROT*: GOD'S MIGHTY ACTS. Rabbi Richard Sarason.
<http://tmt.urj.net/archives/4jewishethics/081309.html>

⁴ http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=39&page_prq_id=4687&page_id=1656

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Obviously our movement did a complete 180 on this one – and rabbis give sermons like the one I gave last night. We are now fully supportive of the land and people of Israel, and we encourage visits, love for and dedication to our homeland. Contrast the words from 1885 with our most recent statement, A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, published in 1999, stated,

“We are committed to **מְדִינַת יִשְׂרָאֵל** (*Medinat Yisrael*), the State of Israel, and rejoice in its accomplishments. We affirm the unique qualities of living in **אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל** (*Eretz Yisrael*), the land of Israel, and encourage **עֲלִיָּה** (*aliyah*), immigration to Israel.”⁵

So, now we are looking at a return to some degree of comfort, at least on a movement level, with mentioning resurrection.

I am here to tell you today that you, each and every one of you, have also experienced a resurrection. Your resurrection began a little over one year ago. You were all a part of a congregation on the south shore of Long Island, and your congregation, to varying degrees, was ailing. Your congregation joined hands with another congregation nearby, and you prayed for a new lease on life. A major part of this new life, just like individuals do when they survive something challenging, was the changing your name. You joined together, from our youngest toddlers to our octogenarians and beyond, and you gave yourselves a holy name:

⁵ http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=44&pge_prg_id=4687&pge_id=1656

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Temple B'nai Torah.

The healing process is never easy, and, as my sister likes to say, we are not a “cold” – we don't just get better on a steady, predictable path. Rather, our new life, our rebirth, takes us on twists and turns that we never would have expected.

Just as my body and my mind had changed following my accident, and as both continue to heal following my surgery, many aspects of our congregation are going through changes as well. Some parts of my body were always strong, others have had much healing and rehabilitation to complete. Some parts of our legacy congregations were always strong, and they melded together seamlessly. Other parts were sick in some way, and they are being caringly worked on by our strong lay leadership and caring volunteers.

There is so much of which to be proud in our new, resurrected state: so many of our social groups are thriving. There is less and less mention among our congregants of “At Legacy Judea we did it this way,” or “We always did it like this at Legacy Suburban.” More and more, I hear people speaking about how Temple B'nai Torah can or should do something, and this is a beautiful thing. I look forward to hearing more and more people speak that way over the coming years.

Our children are learning together as one unit – they make it look so easy for the rest of us. Our worship rituals have been diverse, and this encourages us all, especially your clergy, to think creatively and eclectically. This is a particularly exciting area for me to watch evolve and take shape. As individuals, we take this Day of Repentance as an

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opportunity to reflect on our lives and what direction we should be heading. As a part of our resurrection, our rebirth as a new congregation, we have a chance to continue to think about who we would like to be.

One way to conceptualize this is to consider the three traditional Hebrew names for a synagogue: *Beit K'nesset*, *Beit Tefilah*, and *Beit Midrash*.

Beit K'nesset means House of Assembly. This refers to all of the social activities that go on inside our walls, such as the events, programs, and groups that encourage us to gather together as one. Many of us are drawn to this holy place for its feeling of family, of community, and of togetherness.

Beit Tefilah means House of Prayer. This name refers to the worship and ritual experiences that take place here. Many of us feel connected to this aspect of our congregation – the moments of spirituality, of song, of contact with the Divine, of prayfulness, even of silence.

Beit Midrash means House of Learning. There are myriad opportunities for learning for all ages, and these take place both formally and informally. Our nursery school, religious school, youth group, and adult education classes all offer a wide variety of learning experiences. We even learn from each other, from each other's guidance, behavior, and leadership, especially when we least expect it.

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Temple B'nai Torah, on this day upon which, a few hours from now, the Book of Life for the new year will be sealed, we can continue to take steps to ensure our growth in the coming year. If one of the areas truly speaks to you – community, prayer, learning, or even something else – please take part. Come, make yourself at home. We are all rookies here, even those who have been members for 40 years. If there is an aspect of congregational life in which you've never taken part, take a chance – try something new. All three avenues are totally equal and legitimate ways of being involved here – you need never apologize for choosing one over the other. Yet, I want to strongly encourage you to experience a new offering from your synagogue this year. This is particularly important for those of you who, most understandably, are feeling disconnected, unsure of where you fit into this new enterprise. I hope that you will keep coming, keep trying, and you might just find yourself making a new friend, becoming a part of a new class or program, and finding a new niche for yourself.

Getting used to these two new crazy clergy people is a big part of it, too. I want to get to know you – I hope you will come introduce yourselves to me, so that I'm not just this stranger up here on the bimah so far away. The cantor and I feel so grateful that you have invited us into your home, and we are honored to be a part of the family.

With any healing process, anytime we use a muscle for the first time, we have to go slowly. We need to give it time. At times, the muscle might give out. We might fall down. There will be mistakes or choices that could've been made differently, AND there

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will also be miracles, glimpses of the true potential of this special place, and times of true celebration. Thank you for being a part of this with me.

God is with us in this new chapter. God has given us all new life. What we do now with this gift is in our hands.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Mechayeh HaKol.

Blessed are You, Adonai, giver of life to all.

Amen.