

7 You faithfully give life to the dead.  
8 Blessed are You, Adonai, who gives life to the dead.

וְנִתְּנָה אֶתְּךָ לְהַחְיֹת מֵתִים.  
בְּרַחֲמֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ

Commentary by:

Marcia

FALK (FEMINISM)

"Giving life to the dead." The second blessing of the *Amidah* is known as *Givurot*, "God's Power." An important aspect of divine power mentioned three times in this blessing — once in the opening, once in the middle, and once in the eulogy — is that of "giving life to (or reviving) the dead."

*michayeh metim* — an attribution that has been eliminated from recent Reform and Reconstructionist prayer books. In place of the words *michayeh metim*, *Gates of Prayer* offers the more general phrase *michayeh bakol*. (p. 76)

cont. next page

David

ELLENSON (MODERN LITURGIES)

"Giving life to the dead (*michayeh hame-tim*)" Several times this blessing cites bodily resurrection as the prime example of God's power. Modern Orthodoxy, from its German founder, Samson Raphael Hirsch, to the American Artscroll Siddur, retains the notion, translating faithfully as (p. 76)

"revives . . ." "resurrects . . ." or "resuscitates the dead." Reform, British Liberal, Reconstructionist, and Conservative Jews, however, have generally rejected the belief in bodily resurrection and replaced it with faith in the immortality of the soul: they have therefore found this blessing's repeated assurances of resurrection problematic. Rather than comment separately on each occurrence of the phrase, I will summarize

the various solutions to all of them here. The authors are not always consistent, however. They sometimes adopt different strategies at different points in the benediction or within different services or editions of their prayer books.

Many liturgies simply remove the Hebrew altogether, although Isaac Mayer Wise left it in his 1866 High Holy Day service, saying of God (in the English), "who killeth and reviveth. . . . Blessed be Thou who grantest perpetual life after death." In this instance, he leaves open the question of whether life after death is resurrection of the body or mere spiritual immortality, but we can see what he believed by the fact that elsewhere he provided *michayeh nishmot hametim* and offered as its English translation, "Thou art faithful to the living and the dead. Praised be Thou, O God, who keepest alive the souls of dying mortals."

A completely unambiguous solution can be found in the *Union Prayer Book*, which followed David Einhorn in replacing *michayeh metim* with another traditional phrase, one that Einhorn remembered from the blessing that is recited after reading Torah, *netei a biokheinu chayei olam*, "who hast implanted within us immortal life." (In 1896, Einhorn's son-in-law, Emil Hirsch, recited his father-in-law's German *Olath Tamid* for English readers and translated more loosely, "dispenser of life eternal.") Earlier in the prayer, Einhorn had inserted *podobn neshoh avadav mimazet*, saying in translation, "with infinite kindness Thou redeemest the souls of Thy servants from death spiritual." He thus testified to his comfort with the idea of spiritual immortality while simultaneously signaling his rejection of the doctrine of bodily resurrection.

More recently, several liberal liturgies have shied away from any sense of an afterlife at all. Two pioneer prayer books of the 1970s (*Gates of Prayer* and the British *Service of the Heart*) — both of which were edited in part by Chaim Stern — substituted *michayeh bakol* (literally, "giving life to everything") and translated it freely as "all life is your gift," or more literally, "gives life to all," or even "Source of Life." Sometimes, the issue is bypassed completely by offering an altogether different prayer in the English suggested by the theme of the Hebrew. All these emendations expurgate the idea of bodily resurrection or even spiritual eternity and instead praise God as the force that sustains all life.

Reconstructionist liturgy has been especially careful to avoid any notions that do not accord with the rationalistic sensibilities of its founders. The *Daily Prayer Book* (1962) removed "You faithfully give life to the dead," from both Hebrew and English, and substituted the geonic interpolation for the Ten Days of Repentance, "Who in mercy remembers His creatures for life." Its current *Kol Haneshamah* inserts *michayeh kol chat*, translated as "nurturing the life of every living thing," and goes on to describe God not as "the One who gives life to the dead" but as "the fount of life, who gives and renews life."

In the same naturalistic vein, *The Book of Blessings* compresses this entire benediction into "Let us bless the well eternally giving — the circle of life ever-dying, ever-living."

At the same time, some very recent books have restored the original. *Siddur Lev Chadash* put back the Hebrew *michayeh hametim*, but translates it "You are the source of eternal life" — an example once again of the contemporary proclivity of the Reform and British Liberal Movements to retain an old Hebrew text for emotional reasons while employing translation to mute or transform ideologically objectionable elements. Most

Reform Jews do not realize that even the 1975 *Gates of Prayer* experimented with keeping *michayeh hametim* in its service for Israel's Independence Day (p. 599). In honor of the occasion, the text for the *Amidah* was drawn largely from the Genizah fragments, the ancient *minhag* of Eretz Yisrael, which the editors were loath to alter, especially since resurrection seemed a fitting way to think about the founding of the modern state of Israel.

Finally, Israel's *Ha'avodah Shebalev* displays another Reform tendency — to retain the latent emotional content of the service by reproducing the rhythm of the traditional text, albeit in different Hebrew words. Instead of *michayeh metim atah*, we have *machpil af mromem atah* ("You humble, even as You elevate" — a citation from 1 Sam. 2:7). The sound or feel of the language is similar, but the meaning is altogether new.

The mantra-like power of the Hebrew for Jewish worshippers is retained also in the prayer books of the Conservative Movement. While its 1974 *Weekly Prayer Book* appears to be comfortable with the notion of bodily resurrection, translating the phrase "With great mercy You bring the dead to life again," the other Conservative precursor to *Siddur Sim Shalom*, *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book*, opts for spiritual immortality by saying, "Faithful art Thou, O Lord, who callest the dead to life everlasting." Elsewhere, the same precursor prefers to call God "Master over Life and Death," a strategy adopted by *Siddur Sim Shalom* as well.

"You cause the wind to blow . . . the rain to fall / You bring down the dew." Traditional practice mandates these lines only during certain months of the year, corresponding to the seasonal cycle in the Land of Israel. As such, they not only affirm God as the master of nature, but do so particularly with regard to Eretz Yisrael. The contemporary Israeli Reform prayer book, *Ha'avodah Shebalev*, therefore happily includes them. However, classical Reform liturgists (beginning with David Einhorn), who opposed Zionist sentiments, removed these lines from their services. The North American *Union Prayer Book* and *Gates of Prayer* as well as the British *Service of the Hours* followed suit. So too did the 1963 Reconstructionist *Daily Prayer Book*, not because the movement's founder rejected Zionism, but because he rejected a personal deity who micromanages nature.

Isaac Mayer Wise, however, took a different tack and inserted these lines as a permanent part of this benediction without variation depending on Israel's climatic cycle. He could thus affirm God's responsibility for nature everywhere, not just in Israel. Great Britain's Liberal *Siddur Lev Chadash* does the same thing, even adding *nuzar tach hashemesh* — God is "the One who causes the sun to shine."

## FALK (FEMINISM)

literally, "who revives all," while *Kol Haneshamah* substitutes *michayeh kol chai*, literally, "who revives all that lives." The substitution of *hakol*, "all," or *kol chai*, "all that lives," for *metim*, "the dead," is, of course, a euphemism — for, after all, what can be "given life" or "revived" except that which is lifeless or dead? — and one that seems

unnecessarily evasive. Presumably, contemporary objections to the phrase *michayeh metim* have to do with the literal interpretation of it as referring to the resurrection of the dead in messianic times. While that may once have been its primary meaning, there are a number of other ways to read it and to reconstruct the idea behind it. Indeed, of all theological concepts, that of *ichiyat hametim*, "revival of the dead," seems especially worth grappling with, since it addresses one of the monumental concerns of human life — our relationship to mortality.

I find *ichiyat hametim* to be especially meaningful when it is understood to be an affirmation of death as an integral part of life. For what is life without death? And what life is not part of the circle of dying, and what death is not part of the circle of living? I have tried to express this in a meditation for this section of the *Amidah* (found in *The Book of Blessings*):

*To celebrate life is to acknowledge the ongoing dying, and ultimately to embrace death. For although all life moves toward its death, death is not a destination: it too is a journey to beginnings: all death leads to life again. From feelings to mud to new potatoes, the world is ever-renewing, ever-renewed.*

Unlike Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones rising from their graves or Daniel's prophecy of the sleepers roused from the dust, the understanding of *ichiyat hametim* as life in continuous regenerative movement, continually dying and renewing itself, is neither apocalyptic nor fantastic; rather, it is based on simple observation of the natural world. Yet it addresses an age-old spiritual quest — the need to understand our origins and accept our finitude — through an awareness of our lives as part of a greater, ongoing whole. For those of us who do not find comfort in the realm of the supernatural — in concepts that we cannot embrace with full intellectual integrity — the discovery of meaning and mystery within the natural world can be all we need of miracles. Indeed, it may be for us just as sustaining as the visions of the biblical prophets were in their own time.