

Shabbat Chol HaMoed Pesach sermon April 2017

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Ascetic, carnivorous, computer, electricity, holocaust, indigenous, precocious, and suicide: these are just a few of the words introduced into the English language by one 17th-century writer, the baroque stylist and physician of Norwich, Sir Thomas Browne. Browne's most famous work, his 1643 *Religio Medici*—it means “religion of a doctor”—had a title that was meant to shock and surprise. Why would ‘the religion of a doctor’ be a sensational title? Because, as the contemporary saying went, *Ubi tres medici, duo Athei*: show me 3 physicians, and I'll show you two atheists. The premise of Browne's *Religio Medici* was to reconcile science with religion, showing how at least one person could be up on the latest developments in natural philosophy, but still be a faithful member of the Church of England. Browne set out to defuse what he called “the generall scandall of my profession”—namely its notorious atheism—and show how Christian belief might square with close and critical observation of nature.

As a Jewish physician, I might think I that inherited a much better deal than Thomas Browne. At first glance, Judaism seems tailored to be a successful *religio medicorum*, with its emphasis on study and practice as opposed to faith, its emphasis on argument instead of dogma, and its very much ‘of-this-world’ approach to practical matters. It seems only natural that doctors, and people smarter than doctors too—people like engineers, and even scientists—would flock to this congenial religious civilization, even if they weren't produced by it. And there's further cause for self-congratulation: there is Judaism's generous acceptance of human nature. By that I mean a near-absence of asceticism—no Jewish monks, hermits, hunger artists, flagellants, or celibates.

But let's look a little more seriously at Judaism as a *religio medicorum*, a religion suited for human naturalists like us. Doctors see the human body in all its weakness and complexity. Most recognize the body-mind duality as profoundly false—and no matter how many autopsies they've done, they've never seen the soul. The physician sees material and mechanism, and what successes we have confirm our professional bias that the human being is the human body—*ayn od*. Judaism sacralizes the human body in all sorts of ways, from its peculiar insistence that priests lack any physical blemish, to the complex laws surrounding what we eat. And there are the *brachot*: upon seeing a deformed person, one expresses wonder, like a naturalist—*m'shaneh ha-b'riot*--Praise G-d, who makes all creatures different. And there's the *asher yatzar*, with its charming evocation of the hollow organs and orifices we know so well, whose lack of blockage enables us all to stand before G-d.

And as if that weren't enough, there's the body-centeredness of Hebrew itself, the sacred language for embodied souls. Our set of laws is ‘the walking,’ the *halacha*; our

codification of customs is the ‘prepared table,’ the *shulchan aruch*. We don’t just state abstractly that G-d is One; we start with a sensual invocation: *sh’ma*--‘listen!’ Our concept of spirit is ‘breath’—*ruach*. And the word for ‘self’—*etzem*—is bone. All in all, a nicely packaged *religio medici*. And taught by sages who were themselves physicians: Dr. Maimonides, Dr. Nachmanides, Dr. Yehuda Halevy, etc. Enough to make one feel positively complacent: we Jewish physicians seem to have an easy job compared with poor Dr. Browne, who has to justify or take on faith a host of unnatural dogmas.

But now it’s Pesach time: the time of the simulated fruit slices in unworldly colors; the time of chocolate and eggs; time to renew our faith commitment to the resurrection of the body after death. Now if this sounds like I’m speaking in the wrong church, bear with me; I know this is Saturday midday at Beth El, not sunrise on Sunday on Mount Soledad. But we do share with our Christian cousins the need to deal with resurrection.

Our text for today does not come from the Torah portion: today’s Torah reading is just a rehash from Ki Tissa, which we read 4 weeks ago, plus a maftir from Pinchas. What makes this Shabbat different from other Shabbats is the haftarah--the brief, spectacular prophetic episode of the *‘atzamot y’veishot*, the Dry Bones, on page 1308 in the *Etz Hayim* chumash. Now for anyone who hasn’t read the book or heard the song, or seen the Gustave Doré print, or read the web cartoon, here’s the story: HaShem takes Ezekiel to a valley full of human bones and asks “can these bones live?” “You would know,” Ezekiel says to G-d. Prophecy, says HaShem. Ezekiel does, and the bones assemble into skeletons, then, anatomically correctly, acquire ligaments, then flesh, and then the breath of life. “This is the whole House of Israel,” says G-d, in case Ezekiel doesn’t get it. “I will take you out of your graves and back to your Land, where you will live again.”

Ezekiel wrote at a time of exile, when the Jewish people had lost their homeland and been buried in the grave of Babylonia. His message of rebirth, of resurrection, has given hope to Jews in all the subsequent exiles, and to other exiled and downtrodden people, including Americans. The song “Them bones”—in the category once known as Negro spirituals—came from the rural South in the 19th century and was written down by the Johnson Brothers in 1928. The song’s playfulness—“the foot bone’s connected to the ankle bone, the ankle bone’s connected to the shin bone”—contrasts sharply with the appalling social conditions under which it was written.

So what’s the connection to Pesach? In their introduction, the *Etz Hayim* editors say “the reason why Ezekiel’s vision of resurrection was chosen for reading on Pesach is somewhat obscure.” Take it as a parable about exile and the hope of national regeneration, and it doesn’t seem at all obscure. In the Talmud tractate *Sanhedrin*, the rabbis argue how to understand the story: one opinion says it’s just a parable. But the majority of the Amoraim say that this

episode was no dream and really took place, and at least some relate the episode to Pesach. The opinion of Rav, later echoed by Rashi, is that these are 200,000 Ephraimites who left Egypt prematurely, following a false messiah. Slain by the Philistines, their bones dried for 8 or 9 centuries until physically resurrected in front of Ezekiel.

If the Dry Bones story is related to Pesach, one would expect to find some textual link to it in the Haggadah. And indeed, at the center of the Haggadah is the encapsulatory statement, “In every generation...” *b’chol dor va-dor, chayav adam lirot, lirot et atzmo...*” There it is, right? ‘Let every person look at his bone—meaning his essence, his self—as if he, or it, came out from Egypt.’ Bones being brought out from Egypt: that brings up more stories about the centrality of the body and the need for resurrection. On Passover night, when the alarm bells were ringing and all the Israelites were madly assembling household items and Egyptian loot, where was Moses? According to the rabbis in tractate *Sotah*, he went to the Nile and called up Joseph’s coffin out of the water. It was critically important, both to Joseph and to Moses, that Joseph’s bones return to the Land of Israel. Joseph, who (says Rabbi Judah) was nicknamed ‘Bones’ in his lifetime because of this obsession, was determined to be reinterred in Israel.

And this brings up another, more complete resurrection story from tractate *Sotah*. It is based on the text of Moses’s blessing for Judah, in the last parashah of the year—this is on page 1203 in *Etz Hayim* (Deut. 33:7): “And this he said of Judah...” Rabbi Shmuel ben Nachmani describes Judah’s bones, like those of Joseph, being carried out of Egypt in a coffin. But Judah’s bones kept rolling around restlessly until Moses spoke these words: “Hear, O Lord, the voice of Judah...” ...and that made the bones stop rolling and reassemble into a body that could have a voice, but the angels would not let him into the heavenly study hall. So Moses added, “...and restore him to his people,” which allowed Judah into the study hall, but the angels would not let him debate. So Moses added, “...let his hands strive for him,” which got Judah into the halachic debate, but he could not win any argument. So Moses finally added, “...help him against his foes,” and now he was really in. This story has all the themes in one package: the Exodus, the centrality of the body, the need for physical resurrection in order to make spiritual progress.

With these stories, we seem to have opened the closet and found a skeleton—a core tenet of Jewish faith that few Jews actually uphold. Another analogy is that we are walking the battlefield of one of the great controversies in Jewish history—the one about bodily resurrection. Bones from that battle are always turning up in our liturgy, and like Southey’s plowman at Blenheim, we contemplate them dully and say “well, ’twas a famous victory.” Take, for example, the way the different movements treat the ancient and deeply entrenched blessing at the start of the Amidah: *baruch atah haShem, m’chayey ha-maytim*. The Orthodox siddur translates it aggressively as “Resuscitator of the dead.” Our Conservative siddur hedges,

using a euphemistic non-translation—check it out on page 115b of your siddur (*Siddur Sim Shalom*, SSS): “Master of life and death.” The Reform movement actually changed the Hebrew to ‘Giver of life to all’—and the fight continues about whether to change it back. In a previous, medieval iteration of the same controversy, Dr. Maimonides expended much of his theological capital to make bodily resurrection his 13th article of Jewish faith, which we specifically affirm when we recite “Ani Ma-amin” or sing Yigdal (SSS, p. 53).

There is one more reference to bodily resurrection in the Passover haggadah. It’s part of the incorporated Hallel service, so you can also find it in your siddur (SSS, p. 134). In Psalm 115, the psalmist states “*lo ha-maytim y’hallelu Yah, v’lo kol yordei dumah*”—‘the dead do not praise the Lord; neither do those who go down in silence.’ But the paradoxical next line is “*v’anachnu n’varech Yah, may-atah v’ad olam*”—‘but we will praise G-d, from now to forever.’ How can we praise G-d forever, since we’re all going to die, and the dead do not praise? Only one way, and by now you know what that way is.

That miracle of bodily resurrection, which is a central tenet of traditional Judaism, strains the credulity of the modern, educated Jew, especially the one who encounters nature on a daily basis. And, not surprisingly after this tour around the Passover boneyard, it puts us in the company of our old friend Thomas Browne. In *Religio Medici*, he first establishes how from even a tiny, apparently dead fragment—today one might say a DNA sample—people can replicate a whole organism: since we lowly humans can get so close to resurrection, what could G-d not do? This, he says with a victorious flourish, “is that mysticall Philosophy, from whence no true Scholler becomes an Atheist, but from the visible effects of nature, growes up a reall Divine, and beholds not in a dream, as *Ezekiel*, but in an ocular and visible object” the [foreshadowing] of his [own] resurrection. Now I’d love to see my own resurrection, not to mention that of my parents, and I must admit Dr. Browne is really trying—and so, I think, should we. Both Christians and Jews have, to a greater or lesser extent, to deal with a short list of what Browne calls religion’s “involved aenigma’s and riddles,” most especially bodily resurrection. Our list may be shorter, but Jewish rationalists are still in the same boat as the physician of Norwich and all the other rationalists among our Christian cousins, trying to limit the exercise of faith to what Browne terms “the difficultest points.”

As for me, to quote another American spiritual, “Gimme that old time religion”—the one I was born into. With a realistic and charitable view of the human body as the source of human nature, Judaism offers an appealing alternative *religio medici*, as well as an arena in which to wrestle with G-d and the mystery of the miracles we ought to have faith in, including the resurrection of the dead. And, as a sawbones myself, there’s no place I’d rather be than where the word for self is bone.