

Life, Death, and Compost  
Yom Kippur Morning 2023  
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What bracha do we say over compost?

No, this is not the set-up for a joke. At least in certain parts of the Jewish environmental movement, this is a question with an obvious answer: the second blessing from the Amidah, *mechaye ha-metim*; Blessed are You, God, who gives life to the dead.

This morning, I want to spend some time reflecting on that blessing with you, in the context of Yom Kippur, and in the second half of the sermon we'll also come back around to the topic of compost.

For me personally, this second paragraph of the Amidah is one of the most moving parts of the High Holiday service. On Shabbat or chag morning, we typically sing it in this bouncy, upbeat tune, as if everything is great in the world. That tune was composed by Cantor Max Wohlberg, who taught at JTS recently enough that he was Scott Stein's father's professor in the '70's. Now, in fairness to Cantor Wohlberg, he probably had a rationale for writing the music he did, and it's likely that we no longer sing it exactly the way he intended it. But even so, it feels pretty incongruous if you think about the meaning of the words.

*Mechalkel chayim be-chesed*; God lovingly sustains the living.  
*mechaye metim b'rachamim rabim*; God gives life to the dead with great mercy.  
*somech noflim v'rofeh cholim u'matir asurim*; God supports those who fall, heals the sick, and releases the bound.  
*u'mekaym emunato l'yesheinei afar*; God keeps faith with those who sleep in the dust.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I hear this paragraph in my head—and, when I'm leading services, bring it out of my mouth—the way my father would sing it when he would lead High Holiday services. Tentative, at first, then almost sobbing with the world's pain, as if to say, obviously we need God's help. Obviously this is too much to bear without God.

For years, going back to childhood, my mental image for “those who sleep in the dust” was of homelessness. I thought of people asleep on the streets of Manhattan, tucked into nooks and crannies of buildings, dusty and dirty, covered in blankets, surrounded by their meager possessions. And I would think, yes, the God I believe in keeps faith with those people. And this interpretation made sense to me because of the context: After those who fall, the sick, and the imprisoned, why shouldn't the unhoused come next?

I'm almost embarrassed to say that it was only in recent years that it occurred to me how the ancient rabbis who wrote this prayer intended it: That those who sleep in the dust are the dead, reading this in the context of the paragraph as a whole and not simply the line that comes before it.

*Mechaye metim b'rachamim rabim.* In great mercy, God gives life to the dead.

What do we mean when we say this line? I want to suggest four options, three of which I actually believe—and I'll also say this is not an exhaustive list; I'm sure there are more ways people in this room, or beyond it in the broader Jewish community, have interpreted the phrase.

The first and most classical is a literal, bodily resurrection of the dead in the messianic future. This has been part of Jewish tradition for centuries, with the rabbis even going out of their way to claim it is rooted in the Torah, which on a surface-level reading it most certainly is not. My modern mind has to dismiss this as an antiquated notion, but I mention it just for the sake of completeness.

Second, perhaps there is some sort of metaphysical afterlife, some way in which the soul lives on with God after the body has died. Maimonides, the great philosopher of Jewish thought, envisioned the afterlife as souls immersed in Torah, in the constant warmth and presence of the Holy Blessed One. I can get on board with something like that. I don't have any clear beliefs about the details—do we retain our individual identities, or become a collective part of divine consciousness? Will I recognize my ancestors somehow, and they me?—but I'm also not sure it matters. This seems like a good and fitting role for God, and whenever I sing the *El Maleh Rachamim* prayer for the dead, which asks God to shelter them under the wings of the divine presence, I envision something like this.

Third, we could go with a completely rational, non-metaphysical conception of giving life to the dead: The way we all do, by remembering them. When we tell stories about those we've lost, when we give tzedakah in their honor, when we name children after them, we keep their memory going. It is for sure an imperfect system, because human memory is faulty. Not everyone has a child. We remember some things more than others, some people more than others, and the memories fade as generations pass. Still, I know for sure that this happens, and the Reconstructionist part of me is confident in ascribing an aspect of Godliness to the process. In the web we weave of recollection and reminiscence, transmission and narrative, we transcend our basic mammalian nature and reach out to touch something holy. *Baruch Atah Adonai mechaye hametim*—Sacred is ETERNITY, which breathes life into us even after we have passed away.

Which brings me to the fourth explanation, that we understand this bracha as being about compost.

You heard me right, compost. As in, organics recycling. As in, the bin of food scraps that your hippy friends keep in their kitchens, the brown bins the city rolled out a few years ago under Mayor De Blasio and then cut back.

I'll credit my classmate Rabbi Getzel Davis with teaching me this idea our first year of rabbinical school, though I know he didn't originate it. Compost is about returning nutrients to the soil, so they can feed new growth. If you like science fiction, contemporary author Becky Chambers has a lovely novel called *Record of a Spaceborne Few* where she constructs an entire human

civilization that lives permanently on enormous spaceships. In such a closed system, nothing can afford to be wasted, and so the culture she invents for them revolves around their most sacred ritual, that of recycling the bodies of the dead back into the soil. This is deeply analogous to Jewish attitudes about burial, which instruct us to make it as easy as possible for the body to return to the soil. In Israel, it is common to forego a coffin and simply wrap the deceased in cloth burial shrouds. Where a coffin is mandated by law, we subscribe to the “plain pine box,” which will decompose soonest. Once death has occurred, we submit to the natural way of decomposition and give our bodies—which, we’re taught, never really belonged to us in the first place—back to the ecosystem from whence they came.

Why am I offering this particular d’var Torah this morning? At least four reasons.

First, because one of the ways to understand Yom Kippur is that we are reenacting our death—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say “pre-enacting” it. We wear the plain white kittel in which Jews are traditionally buried. We fast, those who are able to, not eating or drinking just as the dead do not. We say the vidui, confessing our sins, in the same way Judaism teaches us to confess on our deathbeds. So on this day that blurs the boundaries of life and death, we do well to reflect on what lies beyond that boundary line.

Second, because it makes a great introduction to Yizkor.

Third, to get really practical, New York City is rolling out a city-wide curbside compost program—and our own congregation’s Debbie Sheintoch is one of its chief architects. It’s already live in Queens and comes to Brooklyn on October 2, a week from today. (It’s almost like they knew to wait until after Yom Kippur.) Now, it shouldn’t be a stretch for me to say there are two kinds of people in this room, those who already compost and those who don’t. If you already compost regularly, well done, and I offer you this d’var Torah as a way of seeing that as a religious and spiritual act.

If you don’t compost yet—and my family and I are in that group—I join with the Mayor in inviting you to start. When we start a new year, we reflect on our behaviors and habits—which have served us well and which have not. My friends, throwing food scraps into landfill is not serving us well. This is a beautifully timed opportunity to turn over a new leaf.

Why? New York City throws away a stunning eight million pounds of food waste every day. When that food waste rots in landfills, it creates methane, which is 30x more powerful as a heat-trapping gas than CO<sub>2</sub>. Landfills are the country’s third-largest source of methane. If we have the power to do something about that, to do our part to head off climate change, and we choose not to, it is a sin.

In the long confessional, the *Al Khet*, that we recite 10 times over Yom Kippur, one line is “For the sin we have committed before you with food and drink.” In the past, I have imagined this line to refer to kashrut, or to not feeding the hungry, or to making unhealthy food choices. But here’s another potential dimension: for the sin we commit by putting food scraps that should go to compost into a landfill.

I'll put it to you another, gentler way. For months now, I have been feeling sad every time I throw away fruit and vegetable scraps. Not food that we've wasted by taking more than we're actually going to eat, or forgetting about leftovers in the fridge and letting them rot. Those are mistakes we make, where we can learn to do better. I'm talking about making asparagus and having to throw away the stems, or cutting apples for my kids and having cores left over, or banana peels. I look at them—on the cutting board, in the trash bag—and I think about all the wondrous complexity that went into making them. How genetics and photosynthesis and biochemistry all combine to evolve these most miraculous plants—and that's not even to mention the complex human systems that get them to my grocery store, which is a whole other *d'var Torah*. A little piece of my heart dies every time I have to throw away part of that incredible plant that God and nature worked so hard to produce for my nutrition and enjoyment. I think about a rabbi I studied with in Jerusalem, Shimon Deutsch. He taught a semester-long class just on the creation story, the first few chapters of Genesis. I remember his teaching about the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Why was it a fruit, he asked? Vegetables, he said, vegetables are fine. They're good to eat, they're healthy, great. But a fruit... think about the incredible color of a lemon. Think about the smell of an orange. Think about the flavor of an apple. How eye-popping, how intense, how precious these are, how much they stand out from the background of creation. When there are parts of those fruits that we can't use, we should not just chuck it in the trash. We should, as Marie Kondo might teach, thank it for its service and dispose of it respectfully.

For a long time now, I've wanted to compost, to be able to give the parts of those fruits and vegetables that I can't use back to nature. For a long time I haven't, because it's complicated, it's extra things to think about and plan for, I'd have to walk them to a compost bin several blocks away in a community garden that's only open at certain hours, I have three kids and two jobs, it's been too much.

Now my excuses are over, and so are yours.

My fourth and last reason for giving this sermon this morning is because it is an invitation for us not to despair, to take action in a meaningful way that is within our personal sphere of influence. Climate change is frightening, overwhelming, and it often feels like we're powerless. The big changes have to get made at the level of governments, of power companies, of manufacturers. Reporting from the New York Times this summer taught me that the shift to green energy is actually happening faster than anyone predicted, which is fabulous news. This city compost program is an example of a government taking a necessary step. Now it's our job to be partners with our city government to demonstrate that we'll make good on the infrastructure investments. And unlike electricity generation, composting is the kind of change that has to happen one household at a time. No one else can take this action for you. Another article in the Times, back in April, about the new city-wide program quoted Kate Kurtz, who is in charge of Seattle's compost program. She said, "Getting things out of the landfill is one of the most powerful tools that we have to mitigate the immediate impacts of climate change." That tool is now in each of our hands.

To take this all back to where we started: When we compost, we become God's partners in *mechaye hametim*, giving life to the dead. We take scraps of food, bits of life-energy that grew

according to God's incredible systems of creation, and give that life-energy back to the ecosystem, instead of diverting them to die in a landfill. And we are contributing to our own life in the face of climate-death, using one of the most powerful tools that we have: the little brown bin.