

## “Sarah’s lifetime was...” (23:1)

Sarah *Imeinu* is not the first person to have died. The Torah does, however, devote considerable “space” to her passing – the passing of the first Matriarch, the first Jewish mother. Thus, I feel it appropriate to address the subjects of death, *Olam Haba*, and *Techiyas HaMeisim*, resurrection of the dead.

*Horav Shlomo Wolbe, Shlita*, writes that one of the most difficult tasks facing people in contemporary times is developing a firm belief in the World to Come (*Olam Haba*). We talk about it, yearn for it, work for it, but do we really believe in it?

*Techiyas HaMeisim* is a very remote concept for us. The very concept of death sends a sense of shock through us, because a living person adamantly refuses to believe that he will eventually leave this world and that he will no longer be with his body, which is how we conceptualize life. It takes a great deal of cogent thought and spiritual development to internalize the idea that one’s soul will continue to exist in a totally spiritual sense, completely divested of its earthly “container.” He must then accept the notion that eventually his body will completely disintegrate, leaving not a trace of its previous physical encounter with this world.

I think it is simply a matter of confronting the inevitability of death and the fear of the unknown. Once we begin to accept the inevitable and understand what takes place when the soul leaves its earthly abode, we might begin to relate more easily to “what follows.” *Horav Yechiel Michel Tikuchinsky, z.l.*, in his magnum opus, the *Gesher HaChaim*, writes a brilliant essay that lends meaning to the essence of life and death. I take the liberty to present the ideas of this essay.

Life is really a bridge, a passageway leading from the womb to the grave. It begins at a point which we refer to as birth, and ends at death. The person that traverses the bridge known as life knows of no other form of life. He imagines this sojourn as being the entirety of life; he has no recollection of his past and has no idea of the nature of his long future. He, consequently, cannot grasp the notion of life before birth and life after death. Likewise, if a fetus could think like an adult, it would ostensibly conclude that the only world is the narrow one it knows. Similarly, to think that our world is the only world of life is equally absurd.

*Rav Tikuchinsky* expands on this idea with a penetrating analogy. Imagine unborn twins who have never seen the light of day. One believes the tradition that there is life after the womb (*Olam Haba*). The other considers himself “enlightened” – much like our “progressive” brethren, who believe only what their limited intelligence can grasp, in the here and now (*Olam Hazeh*). The believer shared with his brother the vision of a new world, a new life filled with people, creatures that would walk upright in a spacious planet filled with oceans, mountains and planets. Stars would fill the sky; clouds would deliver rain to nourish the soil, etc. The non-believer (who only believed in *Olam Hazeh*) laughed and derided his brother’s naiveté. “One would have to be an utter fool to believe this,” he said.

“There is only one end to this world in which we live,” the non-believer told his naïve twin. “When we leave this world, we will fall into a dark abyss from which we will never return. When we leave here – we are gone forever!”

Suddenly, in the midst of this conversation, the mother’s birth pains began heralding the beginning of the end of their stay in their little world. The “ground” beneath the believing twin disintegrated – and in a flash – he was gone. His brother was broken-hearted over the terrible tragedy that had taken place. His brother, his friend, his only companion in his little world, was tragically stricken. He began to cry and bemoan his brother’s fate. “Where have you gone?” he cried. “If only you would have listened to me. In your utter foolishness you believed that there would be a birth, and, therefore, you did not hold on to keep from falling into the abyss. You would not listen, and now you are gone!”

Between the sobs and tears, the remaining brother heard his brother’s cries, the cries of a newborn infant. “Woe is me! That must be the final cries of my lost brother!” He did not realize that while he was bemoaning the fate of his “lost” brother, sounds of joy, “*Mazel tov, mazel tov!*” filled the delivery room.

What a powerful analogy. Truly, everyone understands the message that is being conveyed to us. Just as the nine months of gestation are nothing more than a transitional period, a prelude to a spacious and breathtaking world, so, too, the temporary life in this world is only a bridge to the eternal world of *Olam Haba*. We seem to have no problem understanding the enormous disparity between the narrow and cramped world of the womb and our wonderful world. Yet, we have great difficulty in accepting the vast difference between our world and the World to Come.

Are we that much different than the “non-believing” twin who could not fathom a world beyond his cramped quarters in his mother’s womb? Anyone who thinks that his physical body is the only place life can exist – and who believes that when that body returns to dust life ceases to exist – is as unknowing and obtuse as the non-believing twin.

When we leave the womb, we are born into the temporary world of *Olam Hazeih*, this world. When we leave this world in the process called death, we are really going through a metaphysical experience which for the soul is called birth. Pregnancy is the prelude for physical life, while life is the preparation for Heavenly, spiritual life.

Hence, birth, life and death are interwoven. Birth leads to life in this world, which is actually a preparation for our ultimate destination: life in the World to Come. Death is no longer something to fear, unless one has not prepared himself for everlasting life.