

**Forgiving God**  
**Yom Kippur, Yizkor, 5773**  
[YK5773\\_ForgivingGod.MP3](#)

**Rabbi Steven Saks**

I promise you during the course of my remarks I will explain why I have removed my kittel (robe) and am now wearing this red sweater.

Does Judaism believe in life after death? The answer to that question is simple, yes. Every day in the *Amidah* prayer we praise God, exclaiming, "And you are faithful to resuscitate the dead. Blessed are you God who resuscitates the dead." However, describing Judaism's view of the afterlife is far more complex. While the Torah makes passing reference to the afterlife, it does not define it. Our rabbis do describe the afterlife, but in different ways.

According to the Nachmanides, after the righteous die their souls ascend to heaven. There they will remain until the arrival of the messianic era. During the messianic era, there will be a *Techiyat Hameitim* (a physical resurrection) of the dead, and the resurrected will endlessly live in a utopian state. Nachmanides defines this as *Olam Haba* (the World to Come).

Like Nachmanides, Maimonides, too, believes that the righteous will ascend to the heavens and be resurrected in the messianic era. But unlike Nachmanides, Maimonides believes the resurrected will die again and return to heaven. The question is obvious, why would God resurrect the righteous only to have them return to the heavens? According to

Maimonides, the ultimate reward is for the soul to be freed from the mundane concerns of the physical world so it can bask in God's wisdom. To Maimonides, the soul basking in God's wisdom constitutes *Olam Haba*.

The mystics believe in *Gilgul HaNeshama* (reincarnation). According to this school of thought, King Saul was reincarnated as Mordechai, and Agag, the king of the anti-Semitic Amalekites, was reincarnated as Haman. Saul was commanded by God to execute Agag, but failed to do so and, therefore, lost the kingship to David. Yet, the reincarnated Saul, who was embodied by Mordechai, finally fulfilled God's command to kill Agag, who was embodied by the anti-Semitic Persian Prime Minister, Haman. Hundreds of years later in Persia, Mordechai's refusal to bow down to Haman unleashed a chain of events which ultimately led to the execution of Haman.

I have always considered myself to be a rational person and, to be honest, these ideas sounded nuts. Resurrections of the dead and reincarnation, you've got to be kidding me! At least I thought that until my daughter Gavriella's twin sister, Shira, died, stillborn due to a cord accident. I was now not only depressed, but I found myself concerned with Shira's well-being; after all, I really didn't know what happened to her soul when she died. I realized that though our rabbis have created constructs regarding life after death, they are simply constructs, and we don't really know what happens to us after

we die. Why couldn't I allow myself to believe in reincarnation, so that God could give us another baby and put Shira's soul in that in that baby? In a sense, God could give her back to us. As soon as this thought crossed my mind, I said to myself, "Steven, you're nuts," this is just the mind of a grieving parent at work.

But the next day, God spoke to me as I was praying *Shacharit* (the morning service). When we pray, God is not supposed to speak to us; it is our opportunity to speak to God. Yet, our liturgy is full of verses from the *Torah*. And what is the *Torah*? It is God speaking to us. As I was reciting the blessings after the Shema section of the liturgy, a phrase jumped off the page and hit me in the face. The phrase was "With a *Shira Haddasha* (a new song) the redeemed ones praised your name at the shore, together giving thanks." And who are the redeemed ones? Exodus 15:11 tells that they are *Yisrael*, the Israelites who have just been saved at the shore of the Red Sea and are now giving thanks to God. But who else is *Yisrael* (Israel)? Me, that's my Hebrew name, *Yisrael*. Was God telling me that he was going to give us a *Shira Haddasha*, a new Shira by giving us another baby and putting Shira's soul in that baby? I said to myself, "I must be nuts!"

But then it happened. It was the day we were going to find out if our gestational carrier was pregnant and we happened to have been on vacation in Florida at the beach. The call came and we found out that our gestational carrier

was indeed pregnant. After the initial rush of joy passed, I realized that had just happened. There I was at the shore, together with my wife Anne, exclaiming, Shira! I was giving thanks to God, for he was going to give us another baby in which Shira's soul could live on - literally, a *Shira Haddash* (a new Shira). The blessing after the *Shema* concludes, "Blessed be are you Lord who redeems Israel." That verse had always appeared as ancient history to me. But on the 25 day of *Av* (August 13), that verse became our history as God blessed Anne and me with two beautiful twin girls! Somewhere within those babies resides Shira's soul! I know it sounds *crazy*, but remember every day we Jews declare, "And you are faithful to resuscitate the dead. Blessed are you God who resuscitates the dead." We believe in life after death and regardless of whether or not there is a life after death, I allow myself to believe that Shira's soul resides somewhere within our babies. Why? Because it allows me to forgive, forgive God.

Now I will explain why I am now wearing this bright red shirt. I wore this shirt almost five years ago on December 18<sup>th</sup>, the day I said hello and goodbye to Shira. From then on I wasn't able to wear this shirt; it was just too painful, for I associated it with our loss. That is, until the day our twins were born. This shirt symbolizes that God has made restitution, and one of the steps in the repentance process is - making restitution. As far as I am concerned, God had given back what he had taken almost five years earlier.

Of course, theologically speaking, God doesn't need to be forgiven. Our faith teaches that God is all powerful, just and kind. After all, when bad things happen, there must a reason that God, in his wisdom, has concealed from us. But when we are suffering, that logic is of no consolation. I forgave God not because he needed my forgiveness, but because I needed to forgive him in order to allow myself to move on and be the best father I could be. On the first day of Rosh Hashana we spoke about the need to move on after being victimized. But what happens when God is the victimizer? In my case I looked for a way to forgive God. I allowed myself to believe, set a condition and then waited for God to fulfill it. But that's Anne's and my story. Each of you has your own story. In your own time find ways to forgive God or at least come to terms with the injustices he has allowed you to suffer. Do it for your own sake so you can move on.