

## Making Sense of 15 Months of Physical Distance

*Why we need a way to mark this moment in our liturgy.*

June 18, 2021 – 9 Tamuz 5781 - Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker, Mount Zion Temple

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How are we going to make sense of these past 15 months? 15 months. 66 Shabbats from Friday, March 13, 2020 to today, June 18, 2021. On Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> our building closed and on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, full of chai, of life, we renewed in-person worship.

In some ways, this telescoping of time and our need for normality and the joy of reconnection could make this period of time, these past 15 months, just vanish. We would tell stories, but we could so easily return to life and activity without a way to mark what we experienced.

Whether right now we are in a reprieve of the pandemic or the true ending of it, we do not know. What we do know is that we are in an island of safety, within a Jewish community that trusts science and is the most highly vaccinated of all American religious groups, and is within a state that has had leadership to push us to higher vaccination rates than many states, within the privileged United States that has had early access to vaccines, all of which reminds us of our obligation of *tikkun olam*, caring about the entire population of the planet and their safety and well-being.

So how to mark what we experienced? Our liturgy grounds us in what is time-tested, what is authentic, and what has witnessed the arc of human experience over millennia. We sang the *shehechyanu* and said *gomel* at the beginning of this service just like our ancestors have and our descendants will.

There is also a phrase in our liturgy that we have not said at Mount Zion, probably for over 150 years. It is a phrase that may well help us think about what has changed since facing this pandemic.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> prayer of the Amidah, our standing, central prayers, we look to God as *gibor*, as a source of strength. In our siddur, *Mishkan T'filah*, the first line, אֲתָהּ גִבּוֹר לְעוֹלָם אֲדֹנָי, אֲתָהּ הַכֹּל מְחַיֶּה הַכֹּל אֲתָהּ *Ata gibor l'olam Adonai, m'chayei hakol Ata*, is translated, “You are Forever Mighty, Adonai; You give life to all”. What you may not have noticed in our prayerbook, is that there is a parenthesis in both the Hebrew and English of that line with the word, מֵתִים *meitim*, the dead.

Ever since 2007 when we first adopted this siddur, the phrase “You give life to all” has had a parenthetical option before our eyes: “You revive the dead, מְחַיֶּה מֵתִים *mechayei meitim*.” We have not said those words communally.

Starting tonight, in my own prayers, I am going to say *mechayei meitim* instead of *mechayei hakol*. This will be my practice, and as the prayer book suggests, it will be your choice. I will make this change as my way to mark a transition from the longest-lasting, world-wide shared event of my lifetime. At this moment, there is a renewal of life – even with the extraordinary lifeline of zoom that we had and have - that is like being revived from death.

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My hero in the Talmud (*Berachot* 58b), the 3<sup>rd</sup> century community activist and sage Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi teaches that if you haven't seen a friend in over 30 days, you should recite the *Shehecheyanu*. It's like, "It is so good to see you ole friend; so glad the stars have aligned so that we could be together." But if you haven't seen a friend in a year, Yehoshua ben Levi says that you should say the blessing, "Blessed is the One who revives the dead (*mechayei hameitim*)."

After surviving a year of pandemic, we need expressions of joy and gratitude for seeing each other alive again and for feeling our own aliveness in reconnecting to one another.

When we come to the Gevurot prayer in this service, you will see *mechayei hakol* and *mechayei meitim* three times in the prayer. As you consider the ancient phrase *mechayei meitim*, revives the dead, know that the original sense of these words was about restoring the gravely ill to good health as we know from Akkadian parallels. Eventually this phrase meant the Pharisaic belief in the physical resurrection of the dead, something that became a cardinal belief in Judaism. In modern times, this belief felt archaic, not rational. In the Reform movement, various phrases were substituted. Some phrases focused on God giving eternal life as opposed to resurrection. In 1975, Gates of Prayer introduced the phrase *mechayei hakol*, praising God for giving life to *hakol*, to everything. Interestingly, even in that prayerbook, the phrase *mechayei meitim*, reviving the dead, was included in the Israel Independence Day liturgy.<sup>1</sup>

As I return to this phrase *mechayei meitim*, I do so not to confess my belief about the afterlife, but to articulate a metaphorical understanding of the depths and heights of this life. There are times that *feel* like returning from death: after grave illness, after a deep depression, after

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<sup>1</sup> See Rabbi Neal Gold's master's thesis "The Theology of Redemption in Contemporary American Reform Liturgy" for an excellent reflection on the changes in liturgy over the past 150 years (especially pp 65-69.) <https://bir.brandeis.edu/bitstream/handle/10192/35655/GoldThesis2018.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

mourning, after not seeing someone for a long time, or after even just waking up in the morning.

I believe we can express these words with full recognition of what we have lost in these past 15 months, the deaths that have devastated families, communities, and the world. Over 600,000 people have died this year from Covid in the United States, over 3.8 million in the world, and 895 souls here in Ramsey County. Every life lost is an entire universe. We will be spending years making sense of this loss.

This is the week in the Torah in *parshat Chukat* that is full of loss and wrestling with meaning. We are given a ritual for anyone who comes into contact with the dead just moments before the entire community goes into a tailspin of loss. Miriam dies and the Israelites are bereft of life-giving water. Then Moses in displaced anger strikes a rock to bring water for the people, which affects their psyches causing them to lose even more hope. But by time Aaron dies at the end of this parshah, the people have learned how to respond to death with more experience and equanimity, with clearer ritual by mourning for 30 days creating a period of restoration of calm and breath, and the ability to move on toward the Promised Land.

Judaism gives us the language to hold the loss and the gratitude, so 15 months later, we can feel the joy of relationships regained, of physical touch, for being in community in person without guilt, still supporting those who are immunocompromised who cannot be with us yet in person. And thankfully, we have the tools to connect this service to everyone at home.

As we reflect on these 15 months, perhaps a small change in your prayers of including the words *mechayei meitim*, *reviving the dead*— that have been there all along -- will help you recall the significance of this pandemic and express gratitude for life.

*We continued with the interpretive poem of the Gevurot on page 51 of Mishkan T'filah.*