



PORTAL TO PROFUNDITY:¹

A FIRST INTRODUCTION TO RAMBAM'S LETTER ON *TECHIYAS HA-MEISIM*, AND SOME OF THE DOORS IT OPENS TO *EMUNA* DEPTH

Since the days of the Rishonim, discussions of *aveilus* have often included a hashkafic look at life after death.² The tragic experience of personal loss and *aveilus* often awaken many questions about the details of the postmortem state of the *neshama*, as well as the specifics and reality of *techiyas ha-meisim*, the future resurrection of the deceased.

A particularly intriguing conversation on this topic appears in a lengthy letter³ penned by Rambam in 1190-1191, commonly known as his *Iggeres Techiyas ha-Meisim* (Letter Regarding the Resurrection of the Dead). The historical backstory of the *Iggeres* is itself fascinating, and in the Rambam's masterful hands the topic becomes a springboard over the course of the *Iggeres* for several larger topics in the study of *emuna*.⁴ We will sketch some of that background and touch upon some of these broader points.

The Narrative Background

One of the most direct formulations of *emuna* principles throughout mishna appears near the end of *Masseches Sanhedrin*, in which the first individual identified as losing his footing in *Olam ha-Ba*, the world-to-come, is one who denies *techiyas ha-meisim*, future resurrection:

ואלו שאין להם חלק לעולם הבא: האומר אין תחיית המתים, ...⁵

The following have no portion in the world-to-come: one who denies future resurrection ...

It is in his commentary to this mishna (commonly known as his *hakdama le-Perek Cheilek*) that Rambam famously enumerates his list of the 13 foundational and cardinal principles of our faith, and *techiyas ha-meisim* makes a brief and clear appearance as the final principle:

והיסוד השלושה עשר, תחיית המתים. וכבר ביארנוה.

The thirteenth principle is techiyas ha-meisim. I have already explicated it above.⁶

Earlier he also stated, succinctly and unambiguously, that *techiyas ha-meisim* is a cardinal principle of the Jewish faith:

ותחיית המתים הוא יסוד מיסודי תורת משה רבנו עליו השלום, ואין דת ולא דבקות בדת יהודית למי שלא יאמין זה ...

Techiyas ha-meisim is a cardinal principle of Toras Moshe, a necessary belief for one who wishes to subscribe to the Jewish religion.

Yet despite these unequivocal pronouncements about *techiyas ha-meisim*, there were those⁷ who raised the canard that Rambam had heretically denied *techiyas ha-meisim*. Rambam is clearly frustrated by this radical distortion of his writing:

והנה חבורינו כבר נתפרסמו ויקראו ויראו אנה אמרנו זה.

My oeuvre has been published and disseminated. It can be read and

determined whether I said this.⁸

He wrote *Iggeres Techiyas ha-Meisim* in order to set the record straight, to clarify that he did believe in — and had always believed in — *techiyas ha-meisim*. He reviews various points in his writings where he clearly stated that belief in *techiyas ha-meisim* is necessary and one of the cardinal beliefs for every Jew.

Rambam opens the *Iggeres* by noting the irony that his very attempt to elaborate on *ikkarei emuna* was itself misunderstood as a rejection of the well-known *ikkar* of *techiyas ha-meisim*. He dramatically takes some small solace in commiserating with Hashem Himself,⁹ noting the ultimate irony that His most direct statement of monotheism, namely *Shema*, was utterly misinterpreted and misconstrued by Christians to imply the exact reverse.¹⁰

Of Techiyas ha-Meisim and Olam ha-Ba

One of the great debates on *emuna* topics among mainstream Rishonim is the question of *techiyas ha-meisim* and *Olam ha-Ba*. Both terms appear in the abovementioned mishna and throughout the Talmud Bavli and beyond. At times they appear to be interchangeable, and the preponderance of Rishonim believe that indeed they are. Hashem will bring us back to life to enjoy the ultimate reward. The event of *techiyas ha-meisim* will inaugurate the eternal era of *Olam ha-Ba*. This opinion is often associated particularly with Ramban, as he expresses it repeatedly and develops it at length throughout the final segment of his *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*. For instance,

העולם הבא הוא עולם השכר לאותן שהקדוש ברוך הוא מחיה בתחיית המתים.

*Olam ha-Ba is the world of ultimate reward, experienced by those who will have undergone techiyas ha-meisim.*¹¹

... ואחרי כן יבא המשיח והוא מכלל חיי העולם הזה ובסופה יהיה יום הדין ותחיית המתים שהוא השכר הכולל הגוף והנפש והוא העיקר הגדול שהוא תקות כל מקוה להקדוש ברוך הוא והוא העולם הבא שבו ישוב הגוף כמו נפש והנפש תדבק בדעת עליון כהדבקה בגן עדן עולם הנשמות ותתעלה בהשגה גדולה ממנה ויהיה קיום הכל לעדי עד ולנצח נצחים. Following this world (which will culminate with the era of Mashiach), *techiyas ha-meisim* will inaugurate the ultimate reward which encompasses both body and soul. This ultimate reward is *Olam ha-Ba*, in which we will enjoy unimaginable pleasure through exceptionally profound connection with Hashem. This state will be eternal and everlasting.¹²

Rambam disagreed strenuously with this opinion. One of the central topics of his *hakdama le-Perek Cheilek* is that *techiyas ha-meisim* is one of the end-stages of *Olam ha-Ze*, of this world (in this sense, akin to *yemos ha-Mashiach*). It is not a part of nor the same as *Olam ha-Ba*. In both his *hakdama le-Perek Cheilek* and his *Mishne Torah*, he writes briefly about *techiyas ha-meisim* and extensively about *Olam ha-Ba*.

Rambam believes that they cannot be the same, as he marshals several *mekoros* and logical arguments to develop the thesis that *Olam ha-Ba* will be an entirely spiritual existence devoid of any physical aspects, while *techiyas ha-meisim* will obviously involve the reconnection of body and soul.

He reiterates this point in the *Iggeres*, and notes that his “disequation,” his uncoupling of *techiyas ha-meisim* from *Olam ha-Ba*, was one of the causes that led some to misunderstand him and claim that he denied *techiyas ha-meisim*. Rambam’s brevity in discussing *techiyas*

ha-meisim further contributed to the misunderstanding of his position, as some mistook that brevity (compared to his expansiveness in exploring *Olam ha-Ba*) to indicate that he actually denied *techiyas ha-meisim* entirely. This is of course erroneous, as he pithily notes that a truism stated briefly remains true. Drawing out an idea makes it no truer than the short sentences quoted above, in which Rambam unequivocally states that belief in *techiyas ha-meisim* is absolutely required of every Jew.¹³

The Rational and the Super-Rational

All this begs the question, one whose answer may open new doors for us: **Why** was the Rambam remarkably brief? If indeed he accepts *techiyas ha-meisim*, as he did and as every believing Jew must, isn’t there much to discuss, to elaborate? Moreover, his brevity was dangerous, as we have seen that it led some to mistakenly deduce that he did not truly accept this *ikkar be-emuna*.

Rambam’s response¹⁴ is succinct and profound:

*Belief in one Creator implies belief that He can perform any miracle at His will.*¹⁵ Yet it is clear both from the Torah and from empirical observation that He generally wishes the universe to operate according to the logical and scientific patterns that He founded, and He seldom chooses to actually suspend these natural patterns and perform open miracles.¹⁶

Techiyas ha-meisim is fundamentally and intrinsically miraculous, as physical items tend to decay and corrode over time.¹⁷ *Techiyas ha-meisim* is therefore a “super-rational” phenomenon, beyond the reach of scientific or logical analysis; we know it to be true since the Tanach and Chazal tell us so, but we

have no analytical tools available to fill in details not already provided by *nevua* or by *Torah she-be-`al Pe* tradition. We are thus unable to fill in details of *techiyas ha-meisim* about which we are often curious, such as with which clothes the dead will arise, or whether they will arise old or young.¹⁸ While these questions may often be of substantial interest, and at times be emotionally fraught, we are not equipped to answer them due to the super-rationality of *techiyas ha-meisim*, and we can only say that we will know once it has happened.

Moreover, Rambam therefore wrote very briefly about *techiyas ha-meisim*. This led some to misunderstand that he did not take it seriously, while in fact he simply wrote only what was of substance: we believe firmly in *techiyas ha-meisim*, though we are at present unaware of most of its detail.

On the other hand, while *Olam ha-Ba* is not “scientific” in the usual sense of the word, Rambam understands that it is logical (as spiritual entities do not naturally decay, and ultimate reward is logical), and thus — unlike *techiyas ha-meisim* — *Olam ha-Ba* does yield to rational analysis and elaboration. Rambam therefore wrote about it at relatively greater length.¹⁹

Why the 13th Principle?

A closer look at this notion may resolve another puzzle as well, another apparent anomaly about *techiyas ha-meisim*. It may explain why *techiyas ha-meisim* is an *ikkar* in Rambam’s understanding.

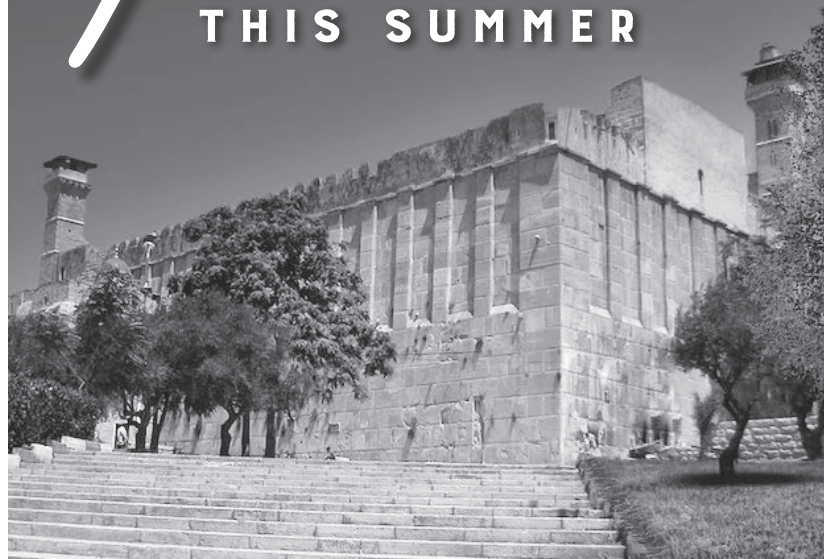
There are far more than 13 true statements in the Torah, as every statement in Torah is true. Clearly, then, not every truism in the Torah is an *ikkar*. Most of the 13 *ikkarim* are self-evidently *yesodei ha-Torah*,²⁰ foundations of the Torah, such as the existence of the Creator Who is the Commander of the mitzvos, the phenomenon of *nevua* in general and the uniqueness of *nevua Moshe* in particular, and *sachar va-onesh*, Divine reward for halachic compliance and punishment for the converse. *Techiyas ha-meisim*, however, requires some more explanation.

For Ramban, the status of *techiyas ha-meisim* as an *ikkar* is simple to explain, as this refers to the ultimate reward of *Olam ha-Ba*. However, for Rambam, *techiyas ha-meisim* is a late stage of *Olam ha-Ze*, unrelated to ultimate reward. Why, then, is it an *ikkar*?

Earlier in his *Iggeres*,²¹ Rambam seems to very briefly allude to this question, and he hints at a resolution

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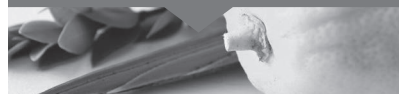
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based upon this abovementioned miraculousness: *techiyas ha-meisim* is an *ikkar* **specifically because** it is a miracle. I believe he means that *techiyas ha-meisim* is a *neis nigle* that has been predicted and has yet to occur. It is a clearly and overtly miraculous suspension of scientific principles that has been prophetically predicted in unambiguously direct terms,²² and whose realization and achievement still lie in the future. Remarkably, while we know little about the details of *techiyas ha-meisim*, accepting it is an application of several of the *ikkarei emuna* listed above — belief in the Creator and the corollary recognition that any miracle is possible if He wills it; the authenticity of every prophetic word — and *techiyas ha-meisim* is therefore an *ikkar* itself.

A Closing Charge

Rambam's *Iggeres* touches on a host of other great issues as well, including when to interpret Tanach literally and when as profoundly meaningful *mashal*; the realness of the intangible and non-physical; the role of *malachim*; the danger and other weaknesses of apologetic arguments; Rambam highlighting the uniqueness of the human beings as a singular fusion of physical body and spiritual soul; and numerous others. Hopefully, this first foray into the *Iggeres* has inspired you to dive more deeply into this *Iggeres* and other *machshava* writings of Rambam and the other great *ba'alei machshava* within our sophisticated and nuanced *masora*.

Endnotes

1 This turn of phrase is borrowed from Rambam's *Hilchos Yesodei ha-Torah* (2:2), "פתח למבין". See yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/927784 for an expanded exploration of this significant phrase.

2 Ramban likely founded the genre of *sefarim* dedicated primarily to *hilchos aveilus* with his *Toras ha-Adam*, and he began as well the practice of dedicating a section to *techiyas ha-meisim* and related hashkafic topics with his celebrated *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, a practice manifest as well in contemporary *sefarim* on *hilchos aveilus* such as *Gesher ha-Chayim* and *Penei Baruch*. In contrast, Rambam's *Iggeres* is an entirely hashkafic work unconnected to *hilchos aveilus*.

3 In introducing his edition of this work, Rav Yitzchak Sheilat devotes the first footnote to whether this document properly ought to be called an "iggeres" or a "ma'amar," a letter or an essay (*Iggeros ha-Rambam*, ed. Sheilat 5755, p. 315). Near the end of *Sha'ar ha-Gemul* (ed. Chavel 5724, p. 309), Ramban refers to "Megillas Techiyas ha-Meisim." This article uses the conventional "iggeres."

4 See Rambam's *Peirush* to *Berachos* (9:7), where he writes

שדרכי תמיד בכל מקום שיש איזה רמז בעניני אמונה
אבאר משהו, כי חשוב אצלי להסביר יסוד מהיסודות
יותר מכל דבר אחר שאני מלמד.

I always seize opportunities to elaborate on emuna topics, as I value teaching our foundational beliefs over any other topic.

Rambam's expansiveness throughout this *Iggeres* is a prime example of this self-description. In the opening paragraphs of the *Iggeres* (pp. 340-343), he appears to explain the rationale for this primacy, noting that a number of his contemporaries were halachically well-versed yet woefully deficient in *ikkarei emuna*.

5 *Mishna Sanhedrin* (10:1), particularly *girsas ha-Rambam*.

6 English translations mine throughout.

7 Rav Sheilat (p. 354 n. 18) suggests that this may have been raised by R Shmuel ha-Levi, the contemporary rosh yeshiva of Baghdad.

8 *Iggeres* (p. 354). See also *supra* (e.g., p. 344).

9 One wonders whether Rambam perhaps saw his own position as a rare sort or analogue of *ve-halachta bi-drachav*, the mandate to emulate Divine traits and conduct in appropriately human fashion. See his *Hilchos De'os* (1:6 ff), where he expands *ve-halachta bi-drachav* beyond kindness and compassion to encompass the full breadth of human personality and character and our response to the entire panoply of life's situations. [See also his *Shemona Perakim* (*perakim* 2 and 4), where he bases this mandate upon an array of

other *mekoros*.]

10 *Iggeres* (pp. 339-340).

11 *Sha'ar ha-Gemul* (p. 299).

12 *Sha'ar ha-Gemul* (p. 306).

As an aside, Ramban's language elsewhere in that and nearby paragraphs appears to be the source for much of what Ramchal writes in *Mesillas Yesharim* (opening of *perek* 1) about the essence of *Olam ha-Ba*. Similarly, his definition in *Mesillas Yesharim* (close of *hakdama*) of *sheleimus ha-lev* appears to be based upon Ramban's language and categories in his *Hassagos le-Sefer ha-Mitzvos* (*mitzvas asef* 5). Moreover, Rav Yechezkel Sarna noted in the introduction to his edition of *Mesillas Yesharim* (5717, p. 9; <http://hebrewbooks.org/41769>) that Ramchal adopted a Maimonidean style in composing *Mesillas Yesharim*; this is true in several senses, and particularly in quoting post-Chazal sources anonymously. Consequently, Ramchal's *mekoros* often remain a mystery. It might be worth exploring how much of *Mesillas Yesharim in toto* is in fact based upon the Ramban's writings.

13 *Iggeres* (e.g., pp. 358, 362-364).

14 *Iggeres* (pp. 362-364), and expanded subsequently.

15 *Iggeres* (p. 367) citing his *More ha-Nevuchim* (2:25), and briefly *supra* (p. 356).

16 Ramban's *Peirush* to *Bereishis* (6:19), *Shemos* (13:16) and *Devarim* (20:9). See also *Chanukka To-Go* 5777 (p. 22).

17 In modern parlance, *techiyas ha-meisim* is a miraculous violation of the usual principle of entropy and the second law of thermodynamics.

18 *Hakdama le-Perek Cheilek* (ed. Sheilat, p. 130).

19 Additionally, *techiyas ha-meisim* has been a well-known and well-accepted Torah concept, while *Olam ha-Ba* was not a topic of popular focus and thus Rambam felt that it needed heightened educational focus and emphasis.

20 This is one of the terms that Rambam frequently uses in reference to the 13 *ikkarim*.

21 *Iggeres* (pp. 356-357), paragraph concluding לזה נחשוב תחיית המתים מפינות התורה, "... and for this reason we enumerate *techiyas ha-meisim* among the cardinal, foundational principles of Torah."

22 Daniel 12 cited in *Iggeres* (pp. 353, 357 and n. 65).