



## Did He Or Didn't He? Jewish Views of the Resurrection of Jesus

Jewish scholars have paid more attention to the person of Y'shua (Jesus) in the last hundred years than they have in the previous nineteen hundred. None deny his Jewishness. After all, Jesus was born to a Jewish mother, lived in Israel and taught a group of Jewish disciples. He also celebrated Jewish holidays. Modern Jewish theologian and rabbi, Pinchas Lapide, notes:

*The love of Jesus and the academic interest in him and his impact were implanted in me by Jewish teachers like Joseph Klausner, for whom Jesus was "the most Jewish of all Jews," Martin Buber, who perceived him as "his great brother," and Leo Baeck, the last luminary of the German school of rabbis, who in the year 1938 at the time of the Nazi Kristallnacht managed to write of him: "We see before us a man who according to all the signs of his personality discloses the Jewish character, in whom the purity and worth of Judaism is so specially and so clearly revealed."*<sup>1</sup>

The main areas of debate and speculation among Jewish scholars about Jesus concern his words. Which did he actually say and which, if any, were added later by other writers who wanted to put forth their own versions of his message?

Did Jesus live? No dispute. Did he die?

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Absolutely. Yet one issue which is rarely examined by Jewish scholars is the historical event upon which his message stands or falls: his resurrection from the dead. It is the belief in this event which his first century followers took to heart and boldly proclaimed to the rest of the world. It is the central claim of the New Testament. One of his followers, Paul, put it this way:

*If we hoped in Messiah in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. But now Messiah has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. (1 Corinthians 15: 19-20)*

Until recently, most Orthodox Jews could reject the resurrection of Y'shua, on the basis that they do not accept the idea of a Messiah who dies and is then resurrected. However, in the summer of 1996 a curious situation developed in the Orthodox community. The Lubavitch Chassidim were hailing their rebbe, the late Menachem Mendel Schneerson, as King Messiah. He had died two years earlier, yet they were expecting him to rise from his grave. Other Orthodox Jews found this notion to be an embarrassment. Then, the membership of the of the Rabbinical Council of America (1,000 Orthodox rabbis) passed a resolution stating,

*There is not and has never been a place in Judaism for the belief that Mashiach ben David will bring his Messianic mission only to experience death, burial and resurrection before completing it.<sup>2</sup>*

In response to this, noted Orthodox rabbi, Ahron Soloveitchik (Yeshiva University dean and head of Brisk Yeshiva in Chicago) offered his own comments. While he stated that he did not believe Menachem Schneerson to be the Messiah, he said that the idea of a Messiah who dies and is later resurrected "cannot be dismissed as a belief that is outside the pale of orthodoxy."<sup>3</sup>

This quote fueled the controversy even more, as Lubavitch rabbis were quick to embrace his words and non-Lubavitch rabbis were just as quick to explain how Soloveitchik's words were taken out of context.

Today, as some Lubavitch still fervently believe in Schneerson's return, the debate over the concept of a dead and resurrected Messiah continues.

In light of the renewed interest in the Jewish community concerning the death and resurrection of Messiah, it is time for another look at the resurrection claims of Y'shua. This kind of inquiry may be too threatening to many Jews. For the Lubavitchers who now believe in the death and resurrection of Messiah,



considering Jesus' claims would cast doubt on their own convictions regarding Menachem Schneerson. Despite this open debate among the Orthodox concerning resurrection, Y'shua remains a non-candidate for the position of Messiah.

For most non-Orthodox Jews, however, there is a variety of other reasons to reject the resurrection of Y'shua. The Jewish atheist, for example, will categorically deny the supernatural. Along with the parting of the Red

Sea, the provision of manna in the wilderness, and the sun standing still, resurrection is not a possibility.

The Jewish agnostic believes that since we can't know one way or the other, the issue is irrelevant to pursue. "How can we judge," the agnostic postures, "nearly two thousand years later, the veracity of supposed 'eye-witness accounts.'"

Others are more pragmatic and espouse that since they have never seen anyone rise from the dead, it is simply not logical to believe in such a thing.

Finally, there is a cultural response from the Jewish community which often makes the issue a moot point long before it is ever taken seriously. Namely, "We Jews don't believe that Jesus rose from the dead because Jesus is not for us Jews to consider—period."

But whether or not the rabbis or the secularists or agnostics give us permission to believe, that does not make it true or false. The resurrection of Y'shua, as with any historical event, must be explored and examined on the weight of the evidence. It is not logical to say that it is okay for Gentiles to believe in the resurrection but it is not acceptable for Jews to believe. Either it happened or it didn't. As Maimonides once declared,

*A truth, once it is established by proof, neither gains additional force from its acceptance by all scholars, nor loses any force if all reject it . . . .*<sup>4</sup>

So, exactly what evidence is there to support the claim that Y'shua rose from the dead?

## Evidence from the New Testament

Some people will automatically question the documents of the New Testament when attempting to uncover the "historical Jesus." The assumption is that these writers were biased, attempting to interject their own agenda rather than recording what actually happened. But this attitude often stems more from our modern age of cynicism than from any familiarity with the New Testament itself. It is amazing that so many people who have little direct knowledge of the New Testament have dogmatic ideas about its contradictions or its historical inaccuracy. A familiarity with the

New Testament should be the starting point of any discussion about Y'shua, if only to know what is the traditional view.

The first four books of the New Testament are called the gospels, the biographies of the life of Y'shua. Each one gives the account from the writer's own vantage point and all four mention the resurrection. When Y'shua was on the cross, his followers were defeated and faithless as they did not understand the necessity for his death. After the resurrection, Y'shua physically appeared to them and from then on, we see changed behavior in their lives. No longer were they cowardly and bumbling, but rather they were transformed into bold proclaimers of the message of the resurrection.

Following the gospel accounts is the book of Acts, which records the history of the first generation of Jewish followers who began to take this message around the world. Their message focused on the empty tomb. The remainder of the books in the New Testament (with one exception) consist of instructional letters, in which the resurrection is mentioned repeatedly as the basis for this faith.

History, it is said, is written by the winners. But at the time of the writing of the New Testament, the followers of Y'shua were a small, persecuted minority. They were hardly the group in power, able to say whatever they pleased. And as for their agenda, they felt compelled to promote the belief that Y'shua rose from the dead. Why else would the New Testament contain such embarrassingly truthful events of the fear, faithlessness and sin of the very community which was promoting this message?

The best way to recognize that the New Testament is actually an historical document is to read it. It is hard to come up with any other conclusion. One of the most famous Jews of this century did just that and discovered something quite remarkable. In a 1929 interview in the Saturday Evening Post, Albert Einstein was asked if he believed in the historical Jesus and he replied:

*Unquestionably! No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life.*<sup>5</sup>

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The same documents which tell us that Y'shua lived also mention that he died and rose again. While no serious scholar doubts that Y'shua walked among us, skeptics (both Jewish and gentile) frequently attempt to extract the real history from these documents and throw away what they believe to be myth. Each year a new set of scholars steps up to the plate in an attempt to knock down the traditional life of Y'shua. These new positions are then readily embraced by those who are looking for reasons not to believe. Yet, by the following year a whole new school of thought emerges, taking exception with the previous year's scholarship and going off in a new direction. The Jesus Seminar is one popular example of this phenomenon.

We are left with the question: Were these first century Jewish believers in Jesus the most brilliant deceivers in history, able to interweave truth and fiction in a way that has not been reproduced or uncovered by centuries of challengers, or were they simply sharing the historical events as they happened when they described the resurrection of Y'shua? Until a compelling and lasting alternative is produced, the New Testament must be taken seriously when discussing the resurrection of Y'shua.

## Evidence from Counter-Theories

What are some of the alternative explanations to these historical events? And what degree of faith does it take to believe these counter-theories?

### 1. Stolen by the Disciples

One popular theory about the resurrection, which is even mentioned in the New Testament itself as a charge by Jesus' detractors, is that the disciples stole the body. This provides a convenient excuse not to pursue the issue further, but it ignores the facts.

Fact one: Had the body been stolen by his followers, all that would be needed to disprove the disciples' claim would be to produce the body. No body has ever been produced.

Fact two: There were Roman guards at the site of the tomb. How, then could any of Jesus' followers have stolen his body?

Fact three: There was a giant stone covering the tomb, which would have taken several people to move. The guards could not have overlooked such an operation.

Fact four: Historically, we know that the early followers of Y'shua were persecuted for their belief.

They were offered two options: renounce their belief in the resurrection or die. It seems unlikely that, were the disciples to have stolen the body, they would have all been ready to die rather than confess their deeds. It is true that people die everyday for beliefs which are not true. But these are lies which they fully believe to be true. How often do people die for what they know to be a fabrication?

Fact five: Whatever else can be said about the original followers of Y'shua, they themselves certainly believed that Y'shua rose from the dead. They did not steal the body.

### 2. Swoon Theory

This position states that Y'shua went to the cross and that his hands and feet were pierced, but that he did not actually die. Rather, he merely fainted. Then, after being placed in a damp tomb—bleeding and without food or water for three days—Y'shua was revived and was healed. He then somehow rolled away the stone, got past the guards and went on to tell others that he had indeed risen from the dead.

One offshoot of this theory came from the late Hugh Schoenfeld in his best selling book, *The Passover Plot*. Schoenfeld believed that it was Y'shua's plan to pretend to be the Messiah and that he attempted to fake his death by being given a drug (which would have made him swoon, giving the appearance of death). This plan was thwarted when a Roman soldier struck a spear into his side, which caused his death. The body was then hidden and when Y'shua's followers saw "an unknown young man," they mistook him for their risen Messiah.

Schoenfeld gave no reason as to why he accepted much of the New Testament as true and why he



regarded some portions as suspect. Perhaps he would have been better off denying that Y'shua ever existed. At least then he would not have been promoting a theory which takes more of a leap of faith than the New Testament account itself. But he knew, as all skeptics do, that the New Testament cannot be dismissed lightly. It is a cohesive, coherent and convincing book.

*I accept the resurrection of Easter Sunday not as an invention of the community of disciples, but as an historical event.*<sup>6</sup>

Lapide examined the New Testament and concluded that the recorded events are too rooted in history for there to be any major revisions or deceptions involved in the writing. He believes that Y'shua physically rose from the dead.

Amazingly, Lapide falls short of recognizing the implications of this truth for his own life. In his book, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, Lapide regards Y'shua as a type of role model for gentiles to prepare them for the coming of the Jewish Messiah. To reach this viewpoint, Lapide had to reject the very same documents which were the basis for his belief in Y'shua's resurrection in the first place. Indeed, the New Testament mentions on virtually every page the fact that Y'shua is the promised Messiah, the one whose coming was foretold by Moses and the Jewish prophets. There is no consistency or logic in Lapide's argument.

### **Evidence from Changed Lives**

One response to all these "theories" is to say, "Who's to say what is true? It's all a matter of speculation."

After all, one can reason, even in this century we are presented with mysteries to which we probably won't get answers—What ever happened to Amelia Earhardt? Who killed Kennedy? Was there a conspiracy in the death of Martin Luther King?

To some people, the controversy over these events is proof that we cannot possibly know for sure what happened concerning an incident which occurred almost two millennia ago.

However, the evidence for the resurrection of Y'shua goes far beyond the discussion of source documents and

### **3. One of Many Resurrections**

While Hugh Schoenfeld accepted most of the New Testament as reliable history, only to take a detour around the resurrection, another modern Jewish scholar presents an equally interesting hypothesis. Pinchas Lapide is an orthodox Jewish scholar who has a very unorthodox view of the resurrection of Y'shua. He went so far as to declare,



historical records. In fact, evidence is still being presented today as individuals are experiencing the changed life which is the result of that resurrection.

Y'shua was not a mere victim of a mob. Nor was his death an accident. It was the very purpose of his mission. He gave up his life as an atonement for sin. His words mean nothing apart from this final action. The "good news" is that the Messiah willingly stood in our place and, by dying, took the penalty which rightfully belongs to each one of us. But he didn't stay dead. By rising from the grave he defeated the power of sin and death and enables individuals to have a new relationship with God. And it is this power — the power of the resurrection — which is available to anyone who believes. This power has been changing lives (of both Jews and gentiles) since the first century.

One Jewish man who knew of this life-changing experience was Alfred Edersheim, the British scholar and author of the last century. His book, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, was originally published in the 1880's and is still considered one of the most authoritative sources on the subject. His Jewish view of Y'shua predated the more recent wave of Jewish scholars who have been increasingly curious about the New Testament. To conclude his chapter on the resurrection he writes,

*The importance of all this can not be adequately expressed in words. A dead Christ might have been a Teacher and Wonder-worker, and remembered and loved as such. But only a risen and Living Christ could be the Saviour, the Life, and*

*the Life-Giver—and as such preached to all men. And of this most blessed truth we have the fullest and most unquestionable evidence.*<sup>7</sup>

There is only one reason why a Jew should believe in Y'shua. It is the same reason why a gentile should believe. It has nothing to do with convenience or social standing. Nor does it have anything to do with Y'shua's good moral teachings. The only reason anyone should be for Y'shua is because of who he is and what he has done:

*It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Messiah Y'shua came into the world to save sinners. (1 Timothy 1:15)*

The claims of Y'shua stand alone, even when compared with the sayings of other religious leaders. And to punctuate his claims there is an historical event which stands as a challenge. The New Testament does not present the resurrection of Y'shua as merely part of a creed that must be followed by insiders. It is presented to all people as an historical fact, and there are only two possible responses to it. Either it happened or it didn't.

What do you think? Will your conclusion be determined by the reflex of tradition? Will you dismiss the issue because of twentieth century pre-suppositions? Or will you choose to explore an ancient tomb—where all too few have dared to look.

—David Mishkin



#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Rahner, Karl and Lapidé, Pinchas, *Encountering Jesus-Encountering Judaism-A Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co. 1987), p. 104

<sup>2</sup>*Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*, June 21, 1996 (from article: "1,000 Orthodox rabbis reject claim rebbe was Messiah" by Debra Nussbaum Cohen, Jewish Telegraphic Agency)

<sup>3</sup>*Jewish Week-American Examiner*, July 5, 1996 (from article: "Messiah Debate Swirls Anew" by Eric Greenberg)

<sup>4</sup>Ausubel, Nathan, *The Book of Jewish Knowledge*, (New York, Crown Publishers, 1964), p. 485

<sup>5</sup>*Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929

<sup>6</sup>Lapidé, Pinchas, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, (Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), p. 15

<sup>7</sup>Edersheim, Alfred, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 629

#### For further reading:

***Who Moved the Stone***, by Frank Morison (Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), written by a journalist who set out to disprove the resurrection and ended up believing.  
***Evidence that Demands a Verdict***, by Josh McDowell (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1972). Another cynic turned

believer, McDowell discusses evidence regarding numerous Biblical issues, including the resurrection.  
***The Resurrection Factor***, by Josh McDowell (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1981). In this later book, McDowell focuses solely on the issue of the resurrection.



## In The Little Shtetl Of Vaysechvoos

There were many theories about the demise of Chaika that were bantered about in Vaysechvoos. Chaika the Wise was very old. How old, no one knew. But there was no one living who could remember her as a young person, even those who were now in their eighties and nineties.

"She knew she was dying," remarked Zlata the Dyer, "and being the private person she was, she decided to leave town so as not to make herself the center of attention."

"No, that could not be true," exclaimed Malkah the Tailor's wife.



"Chaika had no one apart from our little community here in Vaysechvoos. She would have had no place to go. I think she is lying dead in a field nearby waiting to be discovered."

And on and on went the speculation, for Chaika was nowhere to be found. She had never absented herself from the women's *mikvah* or the Shabbos festivities, yet this week she was present for neither.

The rabbi's wife went to Chaika's modest home to see if perhaps she was ill and needed help. To

her surprise, the door was unlocked and as she pressed against it to knock, it swung open.

The *rebbitzen* shouted out the name of the elderly Chaika. Everyone knew that the woman was nearly deaf. But Chaika was not there to hear the shout. The house was neat and clean. The bed was properly made, the dishes were all put away in the cupboard and the floors had been swept. So where was Chaika? There was no note and no indication of where she might have gone.

The *rebbitzen* rushed home to talk things over with her husband. She told him that the gossip reporting Chaika's demise must be true. There was no other possibility. "Wouldn't it be right to sit *shiva*?" she inquired.

The rabbi thought it through and said, "We can't sit shiva until a *Beth Din* declares Chaika to be dead." But the *rebbetin* and the other women who loved Chaika grieved. No *kaddish*. No shiva. No Chaika.

"Will she pass away like a small cloud in a breeze?" they wondered.

All the town seemed to be grieving the loss, so the *rebbe* magnanimously called five other village rabbis to form a court of inquiry. They sat at the table in Chaika's house and one villager after another came to give testimony.

"If Chaika were not dead, she would not have done this," declared Rivkah, who considered herself to be one of Chaika's friends.

Several of the young wives recounted the same story, "She always came to the *mikvah* to pray with us younger women, to urge us on to



and when the people of the village imagined themselves afflicted and ill without Chaika, their tears were like a flood.

So you can imagine what a scene there was when Chaika arrived. No one saw the *balagoulah* drop her off. She quietly opened the door and saw all the visitors around her table. "It's so wonderful that you all came to welcome me home, but who are these pious gentlemen here in my house?"

Still sobbing, Rivkah from the mikvah said "Chaika, Chaika, they came to declare you dead so that we could all grieve properly."

Chaika grimaced. "Sooooo."

"They just pronounced you dead and we were listening to the eulogies," Rivkah explained.

"But Rivkah, friends, I'm not dead. I'm old, but I'm not dead."

"Shaa. Still," the rabbi's wife shook her finger at the saintly woman.

"If such august rabbis have declared you dead, who are you to contradict them?" ■

godliness. If there is no Chaika in Vaysechvoos, she must be dead."

When the rabbis heard of her good works, her piety, her generosity, how she always visited the poor and the needy despite her tired and old bones, tears came to their eyes.

When the children of Vaysechvoos showed the court of inquiry the clothes she had made for them as well as what she had mended, there were more tears.

Chaika was a master of healing with herbs and poultices

#### GLOSSARY

*balagoulah.* teamster  
*Beth Din.* rabbinic court  
*kaddish.* prayer of mourning  
*mikvah.* ritual bath  
*rebbitzer.* rabbi's wife  
*shiva.* seven day period of mourning

#### PRONUNCIATION

*a* as in far  
*i* as in is (within a word)  
*oi* as in toy  
*u* as in full  
*e* as in met  
*ch* as in ach! (German)

## R E S U R R E C T I O N

Trojan horse triumph of history

Innocence murdered to end tyranny

Living Word silenced without a remark

Sunlight extinguished to kindle a spark

Freedom sold to end slavery

Man fed to Death to set mankind free

Lamb bred for slaughter; Babe born to die

Devourer poisoned by Bread of Life.

—Jon Isaac