Parashat Bemidbar: Holy People are Still People

Rabbi Joshua Rabin, Astoria Center of Israel, Astoria, New York[1]

Bemidbar 1:51	
וּבִנְסֹ֣עַ הַמִּשְׁכָּ֗ן יוֹרִ֤ידוּ אֹתוֹ֙ הַלְוִיִּ֔ם וּבַחֲנֹ֥ת הַמִּשְׁכָּ֖ן יָקִ֑ימוּ אִתָּ֥ו הַלְוִיִּ֖ם וְהַזָּ֥ר הַקָּרֵ֖ב יוּמָֽת׃	When the Tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the Tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up; any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death.

1. **Rabbi Akiva Laughs**

Bavli Makkot 24b	
שׁוּב פַּעַם אַחַת הָיוּ עוֹלִין לִירוּשָׁלַיִם, כֵּיוָן שֶׁהִגִּיעוּ לְהַר הַצוֹפִים קָרְעוּ בְּגָדֵיהֶם, כֵּיוָן שֶׁהִגִּיעוּ לְהַר הַבַּיִת רָאוּ שׁוּעָל שֶׁיָּצָא מִבֵּית קָדְשֵׁי הַקָּדָשִׁים, הִתְחִילוּ הֵן בּוֹכִין וְרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא מְצַחֵק. אָמְרוּ לוֹ: מִפְּנֵי מָה אַתָּה מְצַחֵק? אָמַר לָהֶם: מִפְּנֵי מָה אַתֶּם בּוֹכִים? אָמְרוּ לוֹ: מָקוֹם שֶׁכָּתוּב בּוֹ ״וְהַזָּר הַקָּרֵב יוּמָת״, וְעַכְשָׁיו שׁוּעָלִים הִלְכוּ בּוֹ, וְלֹא נִבְכֶּה?!	**On another occasion they were ascending to Jerusalem** after the destruction of the Temple. **When they arrived at Mount Scopus** and saw the site of the Temple, **they rent their garments** in mourning, in keeping with halakhic practice. **When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox that emerged from** the site of **the Holy of Holies. They began weeping, and Rabbi Akiva** was **laughing. They said to him: For what** reason **are you laughing?** Rabbi Akiva **said to them: For what** reason **are you weeping? They said to him:** This is the **place** concerning **which it is written: "And the non-priest who approaches shall die"** (Numbers 1:51), **and now foxes walk in it; and shall we not weep?**
אָמַר לָהֶן: לְכָךְ אֲנִי מְצַחֵק, דִּכְתִיב: ״וְאָעִידָה לִּי עֵדִים נֶאֱמָנִים אֵת אוּרִיָּה הַכֹּהֵן וְאֵת זְכַרְיָה בֶּן יְבֶרֶכְיָהוּ״ – וְכִי מָה עִנְיַן אוּרִיָּה אֵצֶל זְכַרְיָה? אוּרִיָּה בְּמִקְדָּשׁ רִאשׁוֹן, וּזְכַרְיָה בְּמִקְדָּשׁ שֵׁנִי! אֶלָּא: תָּלָה הַכָּתוּב נְבוּאָתוֹ שֶׁל זְכַרְיָה בִּנְבוּאָתוֹ שֶׁל אוּרִיָּה.	Rabbi Akiva **said to them: That is why I am laughing, as it is written,** when God revealed the future to the prophet Isaiah: **"And I will take to Me faithful witnesses to attest: Uriah the priest, and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah"** (Isaiah 8:2). **Now what is the connection between Uriah and Zechariah?** He clarifies the difficulty: **Uriah** prophesied **during the First Temple** period, **and Zechariah** prophesied **during the Second Temple** period, as he was among those who returned to Zion from Babylonia. **Rather, the verse established that** fulfillment of **the prophecy of Zechariah** is **dependent on** fulfillment of **the prophecy of Uriah.**
בְּאוּרִיָּה כְּתִיב ״לָכֵן בִּגְלַלְכֶם צִיּוֹן שָׂדֶה תֵּחָרֵשׁ״, בִּזְכַרְיָה כְּתִיב ״עוֹד יֵשְׁבוּ זְקֵנִים וּזְקֵנוֹת בִּרְחֹבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלָם״. עַד שֶׁלֹּא נִתְקַיְּימָה נְבוּאָתוֹ שֶׁל אוּרִיָּה הָיִיתִי מִתְיָירֵא שֶׁלֹּא תִּתְקַיֵּים נְבוּאָתוֹ שֶׁל זְכַרְיָה, עַכְשָׁיו שֶׁנִּתְקַיְּימָה נְבוּאָתוֹ	**In** the prophecy of **Uriah it is written: "Therefore, for your sake Zion shall be plowed as a field,** and Jerusalem shall become rubble, and the Temple Mount as the high places of a forest" (Micah 3:12), where foxes are found. There is a rabbinic tradition that this was prophesied by Uriah. **In** the prophecy of **Zechariah**

[1] All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

שֶׁל אוּרִיָּה – בְּיָדוּעַ שֶׁנִּבּוּאָתוֹ שֶׁל זְכַרְיָה מִתְקַיֶּימֶת. בַּלָּשׁוֹן הַזֶּה אָמְרוּ לוֹ: עֲקִיבָא נִיחַמְתָּנוּ, עֲקִיבָא נִיחַמְתָּנוּ.	**it is written: "There shall yet be elderly men and elderly women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem"** (Zechariah 8:4). **Until the prophecy of Uriah** with regard to the destruction of the city **was fulfilled I was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled,** as the two prophecies are linked. **Now that the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, it** is **evident that the prophecy of Zechariah** remains **valid.** The Gemara adds: The Sages **said to him,** employing **this formulation: Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us.**

2. Resurrection of the Dead

Zekhariah 8:4-5	
כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת עֹד יֵשְׁבוּ זְקֵנִים וּזְקֵנוֹת בִּרְחֹבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלָ‍ִם וְאִישׁ מִשְׁעַנְתּוֹ בְּיָדוֹ מֵרֹב יָמִים: וּרְחֹבוֹת הָעִיר יִמָּלְאוּ יְלָדִים וִילָדוֹת מְשַׂחֲקִים בִּרְחֹבֹתֶיהָ:	Thus said God of Hosts: There shall yet be elderly men and women in the squares of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the squares of the city shall be crowded with boys and girls playing in the squares.

Bavli Pesahim 68a	
אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחְמָנִי אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹנָתָן: עֲתִידִים צַדִּיקִים שֶׁיְּחַיּוּ מֵתִים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ״עוֹד יֵשְׁבוּ זְקֵנִים וּזְקֵנוֹת בִּרְחֹבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלָ‍ִם וְאִישׁ מִשְׁעַנְתּוֹ בְּיָדוֹ מֵרֹב יָמִים״, וּכְתִיב: ״וְשַׂמְתָּ מִשְׁעַנְתִּי עַל פְּנֵי הַנָּעַר״.	**Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥmani said that Rabbi Yonatan said: In the future the righteous will resurrect the dead, as it is stated: "Old men and old women shall yet again dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age"** (Zechariah 8:4). **And** the staff will then be used as it was used by Gehazi when Elisha sent him to bring the son of the Shunamite woman back to life, as **it is written: "And you shall lay my staff on the face of the child"** (II Kings 4:29).

Tosafot on Makkot 24b	
וא"כ ע"כ הַאי נְבוּאָה לֶעָתִיד לָבֹא שֶׁהֲרֵי עָבַר בַּיִת רִאשׁוֹן וּבַיִת שֵׁנִי שֶׁלֹּא הָיְתָה תְּחִיַּת הַמֵּתִים וְנִיחָא הַכֹּל וְהַשֵּׁם יְזַכֵּנוּ לִרְאוֹת מְשִׁיחַ אָמֵן:	If so, we are compelled to say that this prophecy is about the future (after the resurrection), for both the First and Second Temples have passed, and there was no resurrection during those times. Therefore, everything fits well. May God merit us to see the Messiah, Amen.

3. Holy People Are Still People

Jacob Neusner, "Varieties of Judaism in the Formative Age," in *Jewish Spirituality,* ed. Arthur Green, 173
The rabbi shared knowledge of revelation that God had given to Moses: that made him a holy person; it did not mean he was no longer a person. What made the rabbi different from other supernatural figures in antiquity was his aspiration *not* to be different from other Jews…True, the rabbi was different from other Jews. But…the rabbi's deepest aspiration was that Jews be like them, so that they would not be different at all.

Big Question: How is the rabbinic idea of the resurrection of the dead a more democratizing Jewish idea than what came before it?