A JEWISH THEOLOGY OF RESURRECTION

Rabbi Mark Gottlieb

Does Judaism need a theology of Christianity? The usual answer is no: Whereas without Jews and Judaism there is no Jesus—both historically and theologically—the reverse does not hold. And yet some major Jewish thinkers have attempted to sketch such a theology. The great medieval halakhist and philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) suggested that though the doctrines of the Trinity and incarnation were *avodah zarah*— "foreign worship" (Laws of Idolatry 9:4)—the place of Jesus and the Christian faith within the divine economy must be considered providential: a *praeparatio messianica* for the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophets' teachings about the end of history.

Closer to our day, Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697–1776), one of the most important, if idiosyncratic, rabbinic figures of eighteenth-century Europe, praised Jesus and Paul as faithful teachers of Torah—in some respects, even more faithful than the rabbis of the Talmud—and argued that the spread of Christianity was divinely blessed because the Apostles helped convert pagans into followers of the Mosaic tradition.

But arguably the most daring attempt at a Jewish theology of Christianity was developed by the twentieth-century Orthodox Israeli scholar and diplomat Pinchas Lapide (1922–97), who argued that Jesus really had been raised from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion.

A figure better known today in Christian than in Jewish circles, Lapide has not received the attention he deserves for his theological originality. Make no mistake, in stature and authority Lapide is light-years behind normative figures such as Maimonides and Emden. Nothing here should suggest otherwise. But Lapide raises fascinating questions about the providential place of Christianity in a Jewish worldview, and he argues coherently and without deviation from traditional Jewish teachings.

Lapide wrote dozens of books and articles, many of them in dialogue with prominent Christian theologians, both Protestant (Jürgen Moltmann and Ulrich Luz) and Catholic (Hans Küng and Karl Rahner). Lapide's scholarly focus was on the Jewish origins of Christianity, the doctrinal differences between monotheism and trinitarianism, the use of Hebrew in the Church, and the importance to Judaism of Jesus's life, death, and, crucially, resurrection. Not only did Lapide defend the historicity of Jesus's resurrection, he suggested that it had created the conditions—both historical and theological—for the acceptance of the Mosaic

tradition on the part of the pagan peoples of the Mediterranean basin and, later, the entire West.

Lapide first began to elaborate his position in a 1975 dialogue with Küng, in which he stipulated that the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and resurrection—doctrines generally attributed to pagan influence—had actually "entered later Christianity not from Hellenism but in fact from certain Jewish circles." In this engagement, he invoked a principle of epistemological modesty that prevented him from personally embracing some of these very same claims about Jesus, even as it prevented him from categorically rejecting or refuting them. "As an Orthodox Jew," Lapide tells Küng, "I must say that I cannot accept what you call resurrection . . . since this is not suggested by our Jewish experience of God. But neither can I deny it, for who am I as a devout Jew to define *a priori* God's saving action?"

A year or so later, Lapide would publish, again in German, a full-length treatment of the Resurrection. In the introduction to the book's English edition, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (1982), the Lutheran theologian Carl E. Braaten described the book as an "ecumenical miracle" and "an event without precedent in the long history of Jewish-Christian relations."Lapide's position on the historicity of the resurrection was indeed unprecedented in the annals of Jewish thought. Braaten did not acknowledge Lapide's theological debt to Jacob Emden; even so, there was a marked difference. Emden had offered a fully positive account of the early evangelism to the Gentiles undertaken by Jesus's Jewish disciples, but he had made no claim about the historicity of the resurrection. For Lapide, by contrast, the "empty tomb" near Golgotha was not only factually true but also the key historical factor in Christianity's successful conversion of the pagan peoples of the Mediterranean to the moral and theological legacy of Sinai.

Introducing his argument, Lapide underscores the complex relationship between faith and certainty:

> *Perhaps the most Jewish characteristic of the Nazarene is his immortal, powerful hope which found its pinnacle, beyond cross and tomb, in the faith of his resurrection—a faith which, in the unsearchable ways of God for salvation, led to the birth of Christianity. . ..*
> *For that which happened on the "third day" in Jerusalem [i.e., the resurrection] is in the last analysis an experience of God which enters into the realm of those things which cannot be proved, just as God himself is unprovable; it can be grasped only by faith.*
> *A faith which is lived can be neither refuted nor confirmed; it can only be sensed with empathy.*

Lapide here makes three related claims. The first is that the theological disposition of hope, which the reality of resurrection naturally embodied, was an authentically *Jewish* way of seeing the world. The second is that the reality of resurrection and the belief entailed by it made possible the birth of a new-old religion in the world—for without the Resurrection, there was no Christianity. So providentially significant was this new faith that the Resurrection—the new faith's very ground—had to be taken seriously, and above all by Jews.

Lapide's third claim is that belief in the resurrection—as with any other experience of the miraculous—is ultimately a matter of faith. Humans should never presume to know the ways of God's salvation. To drive the point home, Lapide concludes his prologue with the words of the psalmist: "Our God is a God of salvation; and to God, the Lord, belongs escape from death" (Psalms 68:20). Harking back to his earlier dialogue with Hans Küng, he implies that it would be more blasphemous to restrict the powers of God than to acknowledge the possibility of his raising the dead.

Lapide acknowledges the point made by historical skeptics that the resurrection of Jesus was only one among any number of dying-and-resurrecting narratives familiar to the ancient Mediterranean, the Near East, and northern Europe. Indeed, so numerous were these instances, he concedes, that "the skepticism of most non-Christians can easily be understood." But the skeptics, he contends, have missed a crucial element—namely, the Jewish context of the Easter event. The Jewish people, unlike their pagan neighbors, never trafficked in myths of a dying god. Thus, if Jews did accept the resurrection of Jesus, something other than the myth of the dying god must have motivated them.

To these Jewish sources Lapide now turns, ticking off three instances in the Hebrew Bible in which a resurrection, or the physical resuscitation of a dead individual, is carried out through the agency of God's prophets: Elijah's resurrection of the child of a widow (1 Kings 17:17–24); Elisha's resurrection of the child of a wealthy woman (2 Kings 4:18–21, 32–37); and the resurrection of an unknown man through contact with Elisha's bones (2 Kings 13:20–21). "Not a single case," he observes, "seems to have met with unbelief in Israel or have led to any sort of supernatural consequences in the further life of the resuscitated persons."

Not only is Lapide untroubled by the appearance of such supernatural events in ancient Jewish history; he also proceeds to list many instances in *post*-biblical Jewish literature that might be seen to build on the biblical case for resurrection. These include some well-known Talmudic examples of acts similar to those ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament—such as miraculous healing (*Berakhot* 9b), successful combat with demons (*Pesachim* 112b), and multiplication of bread (*Ta'anit* 24b)—plus "a number of resuscitations" from death performed by figures ranging from a disciple of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi to

the third-generation Babylonian Amora Rabbah (*Megillah* 7b) to, in more recent times, R. Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, and Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg, an early Hasidic master.

The facticity of these recorded instances throughout Jewish tradition is not really Lapide's concern. Rather, he is pointing out that resurrection was not a foreign implant in the native soil of Sinaitic faith or something the Jewish disciples of Jesus would have had to import from other traditions. Moreover, already by the time of the Maccabees (circa 200 b.c.e.) the Jewish doctrine of resurrection had proved its "rationality" and superiority over other expressions of a similar belief: "Unlike the mystery cults of Egypt, Greece, and Asia Minor which also believed in resurrection, [Judaism's doctrine] is free from magic, mysticism, miraculousness, and lengthy burial rites, which often degenerated into worship of the dead."

Within Judaism, Lapide writes, resurrection is understood as a sign of redemptive hope: "If God is all-just and all-merciful, then death in this world cannot be the final end." The "small band of the Maccabees," he observes, "believed solidly and imperturbably in the resurrection of the dead and thus were able to overcome the overwhelming power of enemies and to establish again an independent Israel after a subjection of more than four hundred years. Thus, the power of faith in a beyond proved itself an insuperable impetus for improving this world in faithfulness to the Bible."

With this background established, Lapide states his most explicit claim on behalf of the event's historicity:

> *Thus, according to my opinion, the resurrection belongs to the category of the truly real and effective occurrences, for without a fact of history there is no act of true faith. A fact which indeed is withheld from objective science, photography, and a conceptual proof, but not from the believing scrutiny of history which more frequently leads to deeper insights.*
> *In other words: Without the Sinai experience—no Judaism; without the Easter experience—no Christianity. Both were Jewish faith experiences whose radiating power, in a different way, was meant for the world of nations. For inscrutable reasons the resurrection faith of Golgotha was necessary in order to carry the message of Sinai into the world.*

Nevertheless, as if aware that his argument might still sound too speculative, Lapide limits the scope of his claim about the facticity of the resurrection. The power and legitimacy of this belief, he remarks, were restricted to the band of Jesus's followers who had broken matzah and drunk wine with him just a few days earlier and who would become "the founders of the Church." With this restriction, Lapide is beginning to prepare the ground for his assertion that the resurrection, though indeed a historically true event, would play no part in the

already established salvation history of the Jewish people or make any other claim on the Jews of Jesus's day or later. Instead, by his reading the resurrection was fundamentally a sign to the Gentiles who had long nursed myths of a dying and reborn god, and who would now be evangelized either by eyewitnesses to the resurrection or by those, like Paul, who had received the eyewitness accounts after the fact. Of those eyewitnesses, Lapide writes evocatively:

> *In regard to the* future *[emphasis added] resurrection of the dead, I am and remain a Pharisee [i.e., a traditional rabbinic Jew]. Concerning the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, I was for decades a Sadducee [i.e., a Jew who denied resurrection]. I am no longer a Sadducee since the following deliberation has caused me to think this through anew . . . Despite all the legendary embellishments, in the oldest records there remains a recognizable historical kernel which cannot simply be demythologized. When this scared, frightened band of the apostles . . . who betrayed and denied their master and then failed him miserably, suddenly could be changed overnight into a confident mission society, convinced of salvation and able to work with much more success after Easter than before Easter, then no vision or hallucination is sufficient to explain such a revolutionary transformation. . .. [S]omething must have happened which we can designate as a historical event since its results were historical—although we are completely unable to comprehend the exact nature of the occurrence.*

In the penultimate chapter of *The Resurrection of Jesus*, Lapide begins by noting the long history of the effort "to invalidate all supernatural elements of this Easter experience" and then poses the "question which can no longer be avoided":

> *Is it possible for deceivers or self-deceived to establish a faith that conquers half the world? In other words, can swindlers let themselves be tortured and persecuted in the name of an illusion—up to joyful martyrdom? Or is all this only a monumental error? Are there errors of a thousand years that are able to bring forth world-embracing institutions of faith?*

He continues:

> *If I were a convinced atheist, I could say yes to [my skeptical] questions without difficulty. . .. [But] as a faithful Jew, I cannot explain a historical development which . . . has carried the central message of Israel from Jerusalem into the world of the nations, as the result of blind happenstance, or human error, or a materialistic determinism. . .. [Rather, this historical development] must belong to God's plan of salvation.*

We should not be surprised that in several respects Lapide departs from Christian theology. He repeatedly distinguishes the event itself from its historical effects, driving a wedge between Christian and Jewish orthodoxy. Lapide denies that Jesus's death has any religious significance per se—any more than the death of any righteous martyr revered by both Judaism and Christianity over the centuries. "He died as 'a lamb without blemish,'" Lapide says, "as 'expiation for others,' as a selfless sacrifice 'for us'—this is often stated in the martyrologies of both religions, in concepts which originate in the Jewish realm of faith." They are not unique to Christ.

Lapide is attempting here to empty Jesus's death and resurrection of any saving grace *in their own right*, instead placing the emphasis on the events' *historical effects*. For Lapide, a faithful Orthodox Jew, the death of Jesus itself can have no unique theological significance. It possesses no more and no less significance than the death of any Jewish martyr—such as Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael the High Priest, both tortured to death by the Romans during the Hadrianic persecutions in the mid-second century c.e.

In Lapide's account, Jesus is also not the promised messiah of the Jews because, as anyone can plainly see, the world remains tragically unredeemed. "Indeed, this world remains unsaved," Lapide avers, "and we all are still suffering in it just as we also are still responsible for it. But that experience of a handful of Bible-believing Jews who were able to carry their faith in God into the Gentile world must surely be interpreted as a God-willed encouragement in a world that so often seems hopeless."

Lapide concludes his unorthodox Orthodox defense of the resurrection of Jesus on a confessional note that recurs throughout his reflections:

> *I therefore can accept neither the messiahship of Jesus for the people of Israel nor the Pauline interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus. I am not striving for any kind of syncretism between Judaism and Christianity. On the other hand, a dialogue between Jews and Christians can be carried on seriously only if the Jewish partner also starts out with the assumption that Christianity is a faith fellowship desired by God which concerns him "for God's sake," even if he does not see in it a way which he himself can or must go.*

Lapide also disagrees with the Christian account of the pagan precursors to Jesus's death and resurrection. Jesus, in his reading, was not God, but rather the source of the Jewish-influenced faith that his disciples would bring to the pagan world. God's "pedagogy" co-opted the pagan myths that were prevalent throughout the entire ancient world. Christian teaching trained skeptics to view as possible the historically true resurrection of a spiritually gifted and just but

mortal person and they were as a result moved by that faith away from the paganism of their past and into a covenant with the one, true God.

Lapide makes use of Maimonides's theory (*The Guide of the Perplexed* 3:32) of divine accommodation. This view holds that the biblical institution of animal sacrifice was a concession to even more primitive forms of worship. Instead of prohibiting animal sacrifice outright, the Hebrew Bible co-opted the concept, giving it structure and discipline with the ultimate goal of moving the worshipper to more elevated forms, such as prayer and contemplation: "Therefore God's wisdom did not command us to relinquish all these kinds of worship," writes Maimonides. Rather, the divine's "wise institution (of temple, altar, and priests) succeeded in eliminating idolatry . . . and establishing the teaching of the Oneness of God in our faith without repelling or deterring the souls."

Drawing on this principle, derived from arguably the greatest Jewish philosopher who ever lived, Lapide suggests:

> *In view of this "pedagogy of God," would it not be possible that the Lord of the universe used the myth of the resurrection (which was well known to all pagans) in order "to eliminate idolatry in the pagan world" through the true resurrection of a just person and [thus] to carry "the knowledge of God" to the four corners of the earth by means of the Easter faith?*

This claim may be Lapide's most compelling case for the Jewish meaning of the resurrection. If, first, the faithful Jew sees religious value in the spread of the Mosaic tradition from "Jerusalem into the world of the nations"; and if, second, a religiously compelling worldview is one in which God providentially assists man in realizing his salvational plan; and if, third, the most plausible way that Jesus's disciples could have had the strength, courage, and will to spread their Jewish teachings to the world was to have witnessed and believed in a historical event called the resurrection—then it is also plausible for a religious Jew to conclude that the resurrection was a divinely wrought miracle.

One of his most distinguished interlocutors, the Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann, put the point well: "From Dr. Lapide we have received for the first time an answer to the question of the salvation-historical significance of Christendom from a Jewish perspective. I find that wonderful. I can accept it: Christendom is the *praeparatio messianica* of the Gentile world for the reign of God."

As a religious traditionalist, Lapide felt compelled to ground his argument in a normative Jewish teaching—which in *The Resurrection of Jesus* he dramatically proceeds to do by quoting no less an authoritative source than Maimonides's code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*:

> *All these matters which refer to Jesus of Nazareth served only to make the way free for the King Messiah and to prepare the whole world for the worship of God with a united heart, as it is written: "Yea, at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve Him with one accord" (Zeph. 3:9). In this way, the messianic hope, the Torah, and the commandments have become a widespread heritage of faith—among the inhabitants of the far islands among many nations uncircumcised in heart and flesh (Laws of Kings 11:4).*

It is true that Maimonides treats Christianity as a form of "foreign worship." But within his providentially driven theology of history, Christianity can be seen as a positive, preparatory development for the gradual conversion of the world to the one God. Lapide, likewise, believes that many errors, theological and otherwise, have entered into Christianity since its Jewish founders evangelized the world. Still, he maintains that the spread of Christianity has been an overwhelmingly salutary religious development, one that an Orthodox Jew should acknowledge and celebrate. And central to the spread of Christianity is the resurrection:

> *[T]he Christianizing of a billion people is a significant way station on the road toward the conversion of the world to God.*
> *Since this Christianizing is based irrevocably on the resurrection of Jesus, the Easter faith has to be recognized as a part of divine providence. All these matters that refer to Jesus, Maimonides says, have to include his resurrection also, for without it "the messianic hope, the Torah, and the commandments" would never "have become a widespread heritage of faith."*

Lapide may strain credulity when he claims to be a traditionalist. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that in his general assumptions he is committed to a traditional Jewish worldview—not only in terms of normative behavior, such as observance of the biblical and rabbinic commandments, but also in his strong belief in the miraculous and in a providentialist account of history. In his thoroughgoing supernaturalism and theology of history he has something to say to contemporary readers, regardless of whether his particular arguments about the resurrection are persuasive.

I will leave it to Christian thinkers to elaborate the implications of Lapide's thought for their own faith. Let me suggest three ways in which Lapide can help Orthodox Jews today, whether or not they accept his argument for the resurrection.

First, concerning the possibility of the miraculous in our largely secular culture, the major divide between believers and skeptics is not about any particular occurrence—for there may be rational criteria for distinguishing between what one believer will claim is a credible instance of the miraculous and another will

deny—but on the question of whether or not the very possibility of the miraculous is accepted as a feature of reality.

Reading Lapide on the resurrection brings this issue to a head. Like all people of faith living in a secular world, Orthodox Jews are familiar with the temptations of a strictly materialist worldview. With science supreme and the reign of quantity dominant, to maintain the possibility of the supernatural is no small task. Therefore, would not an expanded scope for perceiving the possibility of the miraculous be a blessing? This is the field Lapide is plowing—hoping to bring believers of different traditions together in a productive (if inescapably controversial) way. The student who is taught to be skeptical about the possibility of the miraculous in other faiths may very well come to doubt the supernatural as it is taught in his own faith tradition. Conversely, openness to a supernaturalist worldview expansive enough to include instances of the seemingly miraculous in faith traditions outside one's own may strengthen faith in one's own tradition's supernatural claims. To take one concrete example: The rich literature on the phenomena of spiritual possession and exorcism across religious traditions may, for some, point to the reality of a supernaturalist account of man and the world.

Second, Lapide offers a bracing alternative to secular or reductionist understandings of the course of history. Though he is focusing on one particular world-historic event, the underlying logic applies more generally. To paraphrase that logic once again: The resurrection is the event without which the rise of Christianity cannot be explained, and a development of such historical magnitude—in which pagan nations hitherto practicing various forms of mystery religions came slowly but overwhelmingly to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus—must be providentially driven and hence theologically legitimate.

Put more directly, Lapide's theology of history is narrative in nature: The story of the God of Sinai serves as the master-narrative for the West and, increasingly, the world. By zeroing in on the internal coherence and external sweep of the biblical narrative, Lapide is able to draw more of human history—more characters, more protagonists, Jewish and Gentile alike—into the master story. Lapide invites Jews to see all of world history, the many nations and peoples shaped by the Christian confession, as part of Jewish history, as part of "our" narrative, driven by both divine providence and human initiative. Too many students of history, some motivated by animus against Jews, others just reading history through a materialist lens, have placed the Jewish people on the periphery of the human drama. (In some accounts, that changed in the twentieth century when Auschwitz—or the state of Israel—became a focal point of Western self-examination.) Lapide, without succumbing to a false triumphalism, reverses the narrative, aligning the divine drama of world history with the Jewish story of salvation. For contemporary Jews living in either an ahistorical mode of reality or

one dominated by a secular narrative, Lapide's rich providentialism offers an antidote to modern and theologically minimalist ways of thinking about history.

Finally, though Lapide's boldest claims about the historicity of the resurrection may seem largely theological in nature, it would be shortsighted not to acknowledge that his salvational narrative has the power to create a distinctly *political theology*, one that advances a broad interreligious agenda. It must be remembered that in Lapide's lifetime, one-third of the entire Jewish population was exterminated by adherents of a neo-pagan worldview. And as an Israeli diplomat to several European countries as well as the Holy See, Lapide knew how important it was for Jews to feel like a welcome part of Christian civilization. By reading the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus as part of an organic Jewish faith experience, and while acknowledging—together with his faithful Christian neighbors—the historicity of the resurrection, he was trying to draw Jews, a minority, closer to Christians, the majority that invariably held sway, either directly or indirectly, over the lives of then-contemporary and future generations of Jews.

Lapide's political theology is arguably more significant in a post-Christian world than in the culturally Christian world he worked and lived in. For it's surely the case that today's greatest threats to both the state of Israel and the Jewish people living outside Israel emanate from extremes on the political right or left that are radically secular, Islamist, or neo-pagan in origin. Specifically Christian anti-Semitism, though not completely eradicated, is far less of a threat than in previous generations. Indeed, one might plausibly argue that in our post–Vatican II world, the stronger a Gentile's commitment to traditional Christianity, the greater the likelihood of his support for Israel and, broadly speaking, the Jewish people, a support often rooted in positive theological appraisals of Judaism. Simply put, as Lapide might see it, a strong and traditional Christianity can help to safeguard Jews and Jewish interests in important ways.

For this reason, Jews, while certainly not ascribing to Christianity's dogma, have good reason to offer real but qualified support for Christian belief in the resurrection. Without that belief, Christianity quickly demythologizes its own narrative and turns into a milquetoast universalist ethic. Not only does the historicity of the resurrection account for the rapid rise of Christianity, but it also preserves the salvational story still being written by Jews and Gentiles alike, together, nearly two millennia after those world-historic events. For Lapide, the ancient Palestinian Jew who was miraculously raised from the dead, instead of being a snare and stumbling block for Jews and Christians, can be a bridge and a shared legacy of theological coherence, fraternity, and mutual care.

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