

Chapter 3:

Is The Rebbe Alive?

Is the Rebbe still alive? While to many this question seems ludicrous, let us address it in a serious fashion. On June 12 1994 (Gimmel Tammuz 5754), the Rebbe died. He was brought to a hospital where he was declared dead and then quickly buried in Montefiore Cemetery in front of a crowd of about 100 close chasidim. We have not taken the effort to interview the doctor who declared the Rebbe dead or the chevra kadisha that prepared the Rebbe for burial. But we have consulted with someone who was at the graveside during the burial. The grave of the Rebbe is now a frequent stop for chasidim and admirers from around the world. There has even been a large Ohel established to assist visitors. We will grant all of this as true. However, this does not yet answer the question of whether the Rebbe is dead. There are those who claim that the Rebbe has only lost his physical body but still remains as a living, spiritual being.

With this, it is hard to disagree. That every person has a soul that survives his physical death is a fundamental concept of

Judaism. Everyone remains alive, in a sense, after death. Each person has a soul that is attached to his body during life and is then detached at death. This soul continues to exist for eternity.

If this is to what those who claim that the Rebbe is still alive refer, then everyone who ever lived is still alive. Moshe Rabbeinu is still alive. King David is still alive. Bar Kochba is still alive. All three of these great Jews had souls that survived their physical deaths. If the Rebbe's having a spiritual soul means that he is alive then everyone who ever had a soul is alive.

It is therefore crucial to note that the terms "alive" and "dead" have a certain degree of vagueness to them. Alive can mean different things in different contexts. Everyone will agree that in some way the Rebbe is still alive. Even those who reject Judaism's concept of an eternal soul will grant that the Rebbe's teachings are still strong and therefore, in that sense, he is still alive. However, we need to clarify whether the Rebbe is still uniquely alive. Or rather, is he alive enough to be Moshiach?

For this, we turn to a Gemara in Sanhedrin 98a that we will address in more depth later. The Gemara says "If [Moshiach] is from the dead then [he is] Daniel." What this implies regarding a resurrected Moshiach we will discuss in chapter 5. However, it is important that the Gemara recognizes that Daniel is dead. It does not disqualify him from being Moshiach [assuming this interpretation] because he is dead

but it definitely says that he is dead. Yet, Daniel the prophet and leader of Israel certainly has an eternal soul. He is certainly alive in that sense. From the fact that the Gemara describes him as being dead we can see that having an eternal soul is not sufficient to be considered alive in matters of Moshiach. Whether that disqualifies someone from being Moshiach is a matter that requires further discussion. However, if Daniel is not a Moshiach from the living then neither is the Rebbe.

Those who claim that the Rebbe is still alive bring proof from the righteous in general and from four specific historical figures. Let us first address each of these "proofs".

Eliyahu & Chanoch

The following passage from Bava Basra 121b is very relevant to our discussion:

It is taught: Seven people spanned all of history – Mesushelach saw Adam, Shem saw Mesushelach, Yaakov saw Shem, Amram saw Yaakov, Achiyah HaShiloni saw Amram, Eliyahu saw Achiyah HaShiloni and is still alive.

תנו רבנן שבעה קפלו את כל העולם כולו מתושלח ראה אדם, שם ראה מתושלח, יעקב ראה את שם, עמרם ראה את יעקב, אחיה השילוני ראה את עמרם, אליהו ראה את אחיה השילוני ועדיין קיים.

The Gemara lists seven people whose lives spanned the history of mankind from its beginning until the end of history. Adam, the first person, lived into the life of

Mesushelach. In turn, Mesushelach died after Shem was already alive. Thus, there is a straight connection from Adam, the first person, into the life of Shem. Shem lived into the lifetime of Yaakov. Indeed, we are told that Yaakov Avinu studied Torah under the tutelage of Shem. Thus, when Shem died, Yaakov continued the historical line from Adam.

The Gemara continues until Eliyahu and stops with him. Why? Because, as a simple reading of the passage of Eliyahu's death (2 Melachim ch. 2) reveals, Eliyahu did not die a normal death but was taken up to heaven alive.

As they were walking and conversing, behold! – a chariot of fire and horses of fire [appeared] and separated between the two of them, and Eliyahu ascended to Heaven in a whirlwind.

ויהי המה הלכים הלוך ודבר
והנה רכב אש וסוסי אש ויפרדו
בין שניהם ויעל אליהו בסערה
השמים.

(2 Kings 2:11)

Eliyahu never physically died; he was never buried. Rather, his body was taken up to heaven. The Piskei Maharai (102) say that Eliyahu's physical body was shed and he became purely spiritual. However, since this was not technically death, the Piskei Maharai had to find another way to explain why his wife could remarry. This theoretical topic of whether Eliyahu's wife was permitted to remarry continued to interest halachists for centuries. See, for example, Rav

Elchanan Wasserman's Kovetz Shiurim, vol. 2 ch. 28. What is clear, though, is that Eliyahu never actually died.

Regarding the Gemara above about the seven people who spanned all of history, Rashbam (sv kiflu) asks why the Gemara does not list only two people who spanned all of history – Adam and Chanoch. The Torah tells us (B'reishis 5:24) "And Chanoch walked with G-d; then he was no more, for G-d had taken him." There are two explanations of this passage in the midrash. According to one, Chanoch was sometimes righteous and sometimes wicked. Therefore, G-d did him a favor and killed him while he was being righteous. Thus, he died in a state of "walking with G-d" and G-d took him at that point. The other opinion is that Chanoch was so righteous that he never died. Rather, similar to Eliyahu, G-d took him straight to heaven without need for death (B'reishis Rabbah 25:1; Rashi 5:22). Rashbam explains that the Gemara assumes like the first opinion, that Chanoch died, and therefore counted seven people who spanned history. If the Gemara had assumed like the other opinion that Chanoch was taken to Heaven alive, then it would have only counted two people who spanned history.

These two people, Eliyahu and Chanoch, are the only two in history who were taken to Heaven alive. Throughout Jewish literature these two are brought as the highest levels a human can reach in this life. For example, the Kuzari (3:1) writes "However, one should want to reach the level of Chanoch about whom it is said 'And Chanoch walked with G-d' or to the level of Eliyahu, to leave the workings of this world and

relate to the heavenly group". Ramchal writes in his Daas Tvunos (Friedlander edition, ch. 126 pp. 112-113) "We have seen examples of this in this world: Chanoch and Eliyahu whose bodies were purified and rose to be with the highest angels." Can it be that the Rebbe is alive on that level as well?

The answer is simply and clearly no. Chanoch and Eliyahu rose to heaven in their physical bodies. They did not die and were not buried. To our greatest dismay and despite our fervent prayers, the Rebbe physically died almost 10 years ago and is buried in Queens. Therefore, he cannot have experienced the same transformation that Eliyahu and Chanoch experienced. They are alive while, sadly, the Rebbe is not.

King David

Once a month, upon the renewal of the month as demonstrated by the new moon, Jews thank and praise G-d for continuing this cycle with the Kiddush Levanah ceremony. Part of the text for this ceremony is the phrase "David King of Israel is alive and well" (*Dovid Melech Yisroel chai vekayom*). If King David is alive, even though he certainly died, then perhaps the Rebbe is alive as well.

The source for this text is a Gemara in Rosh HaShanah 25a. The government had forbidden the Jews from sanctifying the new month at the time of the new moon. Therefore, Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi sent his student Rabbi Chiya to a safe

place to sanctify the new moon and told him to confirm the successful ceremony by sending the message "David King of Israel is alive and well". Does the use of this phrase as a code somehow mean that King David is still alive? That conclusion is certainly not airtight. Perhaps it was simply a meaningless phrase. However, when we look at the commentaries it becomes clear that this passage is not a proof at all.

The Aruch (sv dvd), an early medieval work written by a contemporary of Rashi, explains this phrase as follows. "David King of Israel is alive – the dynasty of the house of David is compared to a moon as it says 'Like the moon, it shall be established forever' (Tehillim 89:38). In other words, the sighting of the moon has been sustained in the world." The code was that just like the dynasty of the house of David will last forever, so too the cycle of the moon will last forever and has been once again identified and sanctified. According to the Aruch, this phrase has nothing to do with King David still being alive. It is referring to the **dynasty** of King David (malchus beis dovid). The Sefer HaEshkol (end of Hilchos Roshei Chodoshim) also explains this passage similarly and refers to the dynasty of the house of David as being eternal, not King David himself. R' Moshe Isserles, the Rama, echoes this in his glosses to Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 426:2. "It is customary to say 'David King of Israel is alive and well' as his dynasty is compared to the moon and is destined to be renewed..." See also Rabbeinu Bachya's commentary to Parshas Vayeshev.

This proof from King David has been seen to be irrelevant to this issue because it really refers to the dynasty of the house of David and not to David himself. It is not that a person whom we know died is still alive but that his dynasty is still existent and will ultimately be re-established by the king Moshiach.

The Righteous

Proof is often brought from the halachic saying that the corpse of a righteous person does not render a person impure. For example, according to those who follow this saying, even though a cohen is normally prohibited from coming into contact with or being in the same room as a dead body, he may do so if the body is of a deceased righteous person. While the earliest source for this saying is the Midrash Mishlei (ch. 9), there are hints of it in the Gemara. The Gemara in Ksuvos 103b says that when Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi died holiness was set aside. On this, Tosfos quote Rav Chaim Cohen as saying that if he had been present when Rabbeinu Tam died he would have rendered himself impure based on the precedent mentioned in the Gemara (another opinion is quoted that disagrees with this halachic ruling). Since the dead bodies of the righteous do not render people impure, does this imply that the righteous do not really die? If they were really dead then a cohen would not be allowed to touch the corpse. Since a cohen can touch the corpse, the righteous person must not really be dead.

This conclusion is absolutely incorrect. Aside from the fact that there are those who disagree with this halacha (see Tosfos cited above and Tshuvos Maharil 150:6), the very explanation given is contradicted by statements of early commentators. Ramban in his commentary to Bamidbar 19:2 writes as follows:

The reason for the impurity of a corpse is [that people die] because of the effect of the serpent. Those who die with a 'divine kiss' do not halachically render others impure and this is what is said 'The righteous do not render impure.'

וטעם טומאת המת, בעטיו של נחש, כי הנפטרים בנשיקה לא יטמאו מן הדין, והוא שאמרו צדיקים אינן מטמאין.

(Ramban, Bamidbar 19:2)

This is further clarified in the commentary to Ramban by R' Menachem Rikanti:

The reason for the impurity of a corpse is that the Angel of Death inserts into it filth and one who becomes impure [from this spiritual filth] requires purification. However, someone who dies with a "divine kiss" dies from G-d based on the connection to the Divine Presence and the spirit of impurity is not involved with his death.

סיבת טומאת המת הוא מצד מלאך המות שהטיל בו זוהמא והמיטמא בו צריך טהרה. ואולם מי שמת בנשיקה מת על פי ה' כפי הדביקה בשכינה ואין רוח הטומאה שולט במיתתו.

A normal person is brought to death by the Angel of Death. This is what causes a corpse to be impure and render others impure. However, a righteous person is not killed by the Angel of Death but is brought peacefully to his end by a "divine kiss". Since the Angel of Death has no part in the death there is no impurity. In other words, the fact that the corpses of righteous people are not impure is not because they are not really dead. Rather, as the Ramban says, it is because their death came about in a pure fashion.

Yaakov Avinu

A further comment about the righteous can be gleaned from an important discussion about Yaakov Avinu. The Gemara in Taanis 5b says that Yaakov Avinu did not die. This, some claim, is a proof that it is possible that even though the Rebbe was buried he still did not die. Let us see the language of the Gemara and how the commentators explain it. This will clarify that there is no proof at all.

Rav Nachman and R' Yitzchak were sitting at a meal. Rav Nachman said to R' Yitzchak: May the master say something... After they finished eating, [R' Yitzchak] said: So said Rabbi Yochanan: Yaakov Avinu did not die. [Rav Nachman] said: Was it then for nothing that they eulogized, embalmed, and buried him? [R' Yitzchak] said: I expound

רב נחמן ור' יצחק הוו יתבי בסעודתא, אמר ליה רב נחמן לר' יצחק לימא מר מילתא... בתר דסעוד אמר ליה הכי אמר רבי יוחנן יעקב אבינו לא מת. אמר ליה וכי בכדי ספדו ספדינא וחנטו חנטייא וקברו קברייא. אמר ליה מקרא אני דורש שנאמר ואתה אל תירא עבדי יעקב נאם ה' ואל תחת ישראל

from the Bible as it says "But as for you, do not fear, My servant Yaakov, the word of G-d, and do not be afraid, Israel; for behold, I am saving you from distant places, and your descendants from the land of captivity" (Yirmiyahu 46:27). Just like his descendants are living so he is too.

כי הנני מושיעך מרחוק ואת
זרעך מארץ שבים, מקיש הוא
לזרעו מה זרעו בחיים אף הוא
בחיים.

(Taanis 5b)

This passage is one of those that has merited innumerable treatments throughout the ages. We will offer only a few from famous commentators before we proceed to a kabbalistic explanation that is more generally applicable to all righteous people. Appendix A has a larger collection of sources on this topic.

But first we should refer back to the Gemara in Bava Basra 121b that we cited above. In listing the connection from person to person the Gemara places Yaakov in between Shem and Achiyah HaShiloni. Yaakov was alive before Shem died and Amram was alive before Yaakov died. We must ask why the Gemara bothers to mention Amram if Yaakov never died. Did not Yaakov witness all of history that occurred after he was born? In light of that Gemara it seems impossible to take literally the statement that Yaakov never died. If so, why list Amram, Achiyah HaShiloni, and Eliyahu? Note also that Rashbam does not mention that

there are two opinions regarding Yaakov like he does about Chanoch (and whether Eliyahu is the same as Pinchas). Evidently, Rashbam thought that everyone agrees that Yaakov did not live forever. (This same argument can be extended to Moshe Rabbeinu not living forever. If he did, why did the Gemara continue beyond his life and link Achiyah HaShiloni to Eliyahu?) See Appendix A for further talmudic and midrashic passages that imply that Yaakov Avinu did, in fact, die.

The Rashba in his Chiddushei Haggados explains that Rav Nachman thought that R' Yitzchak literally meant that Yaakov Avinu was still physically alive. This, of course, greatly surprised him because the Torah specifically says that Yaakov expired (B'reishis 49:33), was eulogized (50:3,10), was embalmed (50:2), and was buried (50:13). How could he still be physically alive? To this, Rav Nachman agreed and explained that he was not speaking about being physically alive. He was speaking about being alive in a different sense.

What is that other sense? The Rashba answers that Yaakov Avinu is the only one among the forefathers whose children all remained Torah observant. Avraham had Yishmael who went off the Torah path. Yitzchak had Eisav. Regarding Yaakov, however, all of his twelve sons remained on the Torah way. As Rashi (B'reishis 47:31) puts it, Yaakov's "bed was complete". Since the Torah is the source of life, the fact that all of Yaakov's children remained connected to Torah – to life – means that Yaakov is still alive. Unfortunately, the

same cannot be said of Avraham and Yitzchak who had wicked children.

The Maharsha explains somewhat differently that Yaakov Avinu is still alive just like any other deceased person whose soul lives on forever. Then why was Yaakov mentioned specifically? Because, answers the Maharsha, there is a verse that implies it regarding Yaakov by comparing him to his descendants. However, regarding the other forefathers this comparison was not possible because not all of their descendants are righteous. Therefore, those descendants are not comparable to the forefathers. According to the Maharsha, all of the forefathers – indeed every deceased person – is still alive in the sense that Rabbi Yochanan intended. However, Yaakov was the earliest person in history about whom this comparison of him to his descendants was possible. According to the Rashba, however, Yaakov and not the other forefathers is still alive. But being alive is meant in an extremely figurative sense.

Rashba hints that there is another explanation based on the mysteries of kabbalah. He was certainly referring to the brief explanation offered by his teacher, the Ramban, in the latter's commentary to the Torah. This is what he wrote:

The meaning of this midrash is that the souls of the righteous are bound in the bind of life with the Eternal, and his soul covers him all the day, "wearing a scarlet garment" so it not be

ענין המדרש זה כי נפשות
הצדיקים צרורות בצרור החיים,
וזו תחופף עליו כל היום, לובשת
לבושה השני שלא יפשטנה
ערומה, כיעקב, או תתלבש

stripped naked, as Yaakov's [soul was privileged to do continually], or which it does at certain occasions [as do the souls of lesser righteous individuals]. This matter will be understood in light of what is told in tractates Shabbos and Ksuvos.

לעתים מזומנות. ויובן דבר הזה במסכת שבת ובמסכת כתובות.

(Ramban, B'reishis 49:33)

Rabbeinu Bachya, a student of the Rashba, expands on his mentor's comments in his (Rabbeinu Bachya's) commentary to that verse:

Yaakov's soul would constantly hover over his body by the cause of his holiness. The souls of other righteous people who are not on the same level of righteousness as he return to their source and once they rise do not descend. However, Yaakov, in the holiness of his body and his high status, his soul rose and descended. This ability is found only in the holiest of the land, the unique individuals of history – like Rabbeinu HaKadosh.

נפשו של יעקב היה מרחפת על גופו תמיד לתוקף קדושתו כי שאר נפשות הצדיקים שאינם במדרגת הקדושה כמוהו חוזרות לשרשן ולעקרן וכיון שעלו לא ירדו. אבל יעקב לקדושת גופו ומעלתו היתה נפשו עולה ויורדת, והכח הזה אינו נמצא רק לקדושים אשר בארץ יחידי הדורות כגון רבינו הקדוש.

According to the Ramban and Rabbeinu Bachya, the soul of a righteous person can come back to this world in physical

form. When the Gemara says that Yaakov Avinu did not die it meant that he died but can still come back to this world. The talmudic source for Ramban's comment is in Shabbos 152b-153a.

It is taught: For twelve months the body is extant and the soul goes up and comes down. After twelve months the body is gone and the soul rises and does not come down.

תניא כל שנים עשר חדש גופו קיים, ונשמתו עולה ויורדת. לאחר שנים עשר חדש הגוף בטל, ונשמתו עולה, ושוב אינה יורדת.

On this, Tosfos 153a sv venishmaso add, "Nevertheless, when the soul wishes it may come down... even though his soul is placed under the Seat of Glory." To qualify this statement, the Maharshal in his Chochmas Shlomo comments, "Not for everyone but only for the righteous and strong in this world." Thus, Tosfos say that the soul of a righteous person such as Yaakov Avinu is placed near G-d's Seat of Glory. However, when and if this righteous person wishes, he may descend to the earth for his purpose. This is certainly what Ramban and Rabbeinu Bachya meant in their explanation that Yaakov Avinu did not die. He died, but retains the ability to come to this world when and if he chooses.

Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi

This idea helps us understand a further proof that is brought from Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi, the famed compiler of the Mishna who is also known as Rebbe and Rabbeinu

HaKadosh. The Gemara in Ksuvos 103a-b describes his departure from this world in great detail. Particular importance is placed on the last will and testament that he gave to his sons on his deathbed. One of the requests that he made was the unusual step of maintaining his place at the table exactly as it was when he was alive. The Gemara explains that this was because even after his death he would return to his home every Friday evening.

Does this prove that Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi was still alive even after he died? Again, yes and no. Yes, like all deceased people his soul continued to live after his physical death. That kabbalah teaches that the soul of a righteous person can return to this world has already been established by Ramban, Rabbeinu Bachya, and Tosfos. Indeed, Ramban alludes to this by citing an unspecified passage in Ksuvos. Annotators of Ramban's commentary point to our passage. However, Rabbeinu Bachya makes this explicit. After offering his explanation cited above, he continues:

And from this the rabbis concluded in Ksuvos, chapter HaNosei, that every Friday night [Rabbeinu HaKadosh] would come to his home...

ומזה דרשו רז"ל בכתובות פרק הנושא כל בי שמישי הוה אתי לביתה...
לבייתה...

Thus, according to Rabbeinu Bachya, the story about Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi is exactly the same as that about Yaakov Avinu. Both of their souls are housed under the Seat of

Glory but have the ability to return to this world when they so desire.

However, the Sefer Chasidim (ch. 1129) takes the story about Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi to a different level. He claims that not only did the deceased Rabbeinu HaKadosh visit his home every Friday night, he recited kiddush for everyone. This means that Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi was, to a degree, alive since he could help another Jew fulfill a mitzvah. Should this not prove that even after his death he was still alive? A close reading of the Sefer Chasidim answers this question.

The soul in death is like it is in life... Therefore, when the dead wish to wear clothes [they may]... and when they wish to appear they may. And even though they were buried in shrouds they may appear to their children in whatever clothing they want... Rabbeinu HaKadosh would appear in the nice clothing he had worn on Shabbos and not in shrouds to show that he was still in his strength and could help others fulfill their obligation in kiddush, unlike other dead people who are free from mitzvos. Rather, [he was] like a live, clothed person just like he dressed during his life. And the

הנפש היא במיתה כמו בחיים...
לכך כשהמתים חפצים מלבישים
במלבוש שחפצים... ואם
חפצים המתים להתראות אז ניתן
רשות להתראות אע"פ שנקבר
בתכריכי מתים יכולים להתראות
לבניהם במלבוש שרוצים...
ורבינו הקדוש היה נראה
בבגדים חמודות שהיה לובש
בשבת ולא בתכריכין להודיע
שעדיין היה בתקפו ופוטר את
הרבים ידי חובתן בקידוש היום
ולא כשאר המתים שהם חפשי
מן מצוות כי אם כחי בבגדים
כמו שהיה לובש בחייו,
והצדיקים נקראים חיים אפילו

Can the Rebbe be Moshiach?

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righteous are called alive even when they are dead and help their household members fulfill their obligation in kiddush.

במיתתם ופוטר בקידוש בני הבית. ולא כשאר המתים שהם חפשי מן מצוות כי אם כחי בבגדים כמו שהיה לובש בחייו, והצדיקים נקראים חיים אפילו במיתתם ופוטר בקידוש בני הבית.

According to the Sefer Chasidim, Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi was not uniquely alive. After death, everyone is alive and can appear to those still living. However, the righteous are more alive and can even help others fulfill their obligation in kiddush. Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi, as a righteous man, was in a sense still alive even after his death. There is, therefore, no significant difference between what the Ramban and Rabbeinu Bachya said and what the Sefer Chasidim said.

Rashi, however, has a different understanding of the Yaakov Avinu passage. Rashi says that Yaakov Avinu is actually still physically alive.

Did not die: Rather he lives forever...

לא מת: אלא חי הוא לעולם...

I expound from the Bible: And that they embalmed him – they thought he was dead.

מקרא אני דורש: והאי דחנטו חנטיא סבורים היו שמת.

Just like his descendants are

מה זרעו בחיים: כשהוא מקבץ

alive: When He gathers in Israel from their land of imprisonment, He gathers in the living who are imprisoned. Because the dead cannot be imprisoned.

את ישראל מארץ שבים החיים
הוא שהן בשבי, שהמתים אינן
בשבי.

So he is too: He will bring him into the exile in order to redeem his sons before his eyes. Similarly, we see in regard to Egypt: “And Yisroel saw [the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians]” (Sh’mos 14:31) and we expound “Grandfather Yisroel”. They embalmed him – because he appeared to them to be dead but was really alive.

אף הוא בחיים: שיביאנו בגולה
כדי לגאול את בניו לעיניו כמו
שמצינו במצרים וירא ישראל
וגו' ישראל סבא, ודרשינן
ודחנטו חנטיא – נדמה להם
שמת אבל חי היה.

According to Rashi, Yaakov was embalmed and buried because people only thought he was dead. In reality, he is alive forever. How does Rashi understand the sources that indicate that Yaakov Avinu is actually dead? Is Rashi's understanding of this passage precedent for the claim that the Rebbe is still alive? The Rebbe explained Rashi's view in a sicha (Likkutei Sichos, vol. 35 Vayechi 3).

R' Yochanan's intent with saying “Yaakov Avinu did not die” is not in regard to Yaakov's existence as it appeared to the Egyptians but his true appearance (even

כונת ר' יוחנן ב"יעקב אבינו לא
מת" אינה למציאותו של יעקב
כפי שנראית למצרים, אלא
לאמיתת מציאותו (גם של חיי
שזוהי הגוף שלו), מציאותו כפי

Can the Rebbe be Moshiach?

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regarding his physical life), as this is the existence as it is in the Torah. From specifically this perspective he is not bound by the laws of nature.

שמצד שהיא בתורה, זה דוקא אינו מוגדר בגדרי טבע הבריאה.

(Likkutei Sichos, vol. 35 p. 227)

The Rebbe explains that Rashi believes that Yaakov Avinu is still physically alive. However, he cannot be seen in this world. Those in this world cannot see through to the truth that Yaakov Avinu is still alive. This seems to indicate that, like Yaakov, the Rebbe might still be alive but only appear to be dead. Perhaps the Rebbe only appears to be dead but is still alive in the world of truth.

However, the Rebbe continues in his explanation:

Just like with regard to Yaakov Avinu – “Grandfather Yisroel” – the same applies to his descendants, “his descendants are [alive] too”... Eternity applies (also) to physical life. Even though in the revealed this applies only to Yaakov, in the internal mysteries it applies to all Jews... This passed through inheritance from Yaakov Avinu who “did not die”...

והנה כשם שהוא בנוגע ליעקב אבינו, “ישראל סבא”, עד”ז הוא בזרעו, “זרעו בחיים”... והנה גדר הנצחיות (גם) בנוגע לחיי הגוף, אף שבגלוי נאמר זה רק בנוגע ליעקב עצמו, הרי בפנימיות הוא בכל ישראל... וענין זה עבר בירושה מיעקב אבינו, “שלא מת”...

The Rebbe makes clear that not only Yaakov Avinu but all Jews live forever. Just like their ancestor Yaakov, the Jews

do not die. Again, though, we must ask what this means. If, as the Rebbe says, no Jews die, why does the Gemara say that Daniel is dead? Evidently, people live on after death in only one sense. However, even though physically alive in the world of truth they are still dead to this world. They cannot be seen, cannot lead people to war, and cannot teach Torah to the public. As the Gemara says in regard to Daniel, even though deceased Jews are still alive they are, in regards to being Moshiach, dead.

Conclusion

The key to understanding all of the above is that neither Yaakov Avinu, Rabbeinu HaKadosh, nor any other righteous person remains alive after death. Yes, the soul remains alive. And, yes, the righteous can temporarily return to this world from their home under G-d's Seat of Glory. However, they are undeniably dead. All of the figures we discussed are as equally alive as Daniel whom, as we saw above, was termed dead by the Gemara in regard to being Moshiach.

The distinction between being alive and being dead but possibly existent in this world seems small. Why, the reader may ask, do we keep emphasizing it? The answer is that this helps us frame our questions. With this important distinction, we can say with confidence that the Rebbe is dead. Just like Yaakov Avinu and Rabbeinu HaKadosh, he was buried and eulogized. Does the Rebbe's soul retain the ability to return temporarily to this world from its place under the Seat of Glory?

We cannot know for certain, but those who believe, with good reason, that the Rebbe was righteous would grant him this power. However, this is a power that deceased souls have. Living beings are still alive and are not housed under G-d's Seat of Glory.

Therefore, in framing our overriding question whether the Rebbe can still be Moshiach we must ask whether a dead person, even one who is righteous and whose soul retains the ability to temporarily return to this world, can be Moshiach.