The Lives of the Dead in Medieval Ashkenaz

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There is a night that the souls come out of their graves, like on the eve of *Hoshanah Rabbah* [the seventh day of *Sukkot*, considered to be the final day of divine judgement for the year following the Days of Awe], when the moon is out, and they [the souls] go out and pray. And two people went out and hid themselves in a place in the graveyard and heard one of the souls say to her friend: "let's go out and pray." All the souls together left [their graves] and prayed and entreated [God] for mercy so that a death sentence would not be pronounced on the living, and also that those who were to die would turn back from their evil ways and [they prayed] that the ill are made well and [they prayed] about all matters of life and death, and [they prayed] for themselves to quickly remove judgement from them, and [they prayed] for others and their communities. Another year on the eve of *Hoshanah Rabbah* two other people went [to the graveyard

> to overhear the prayers of the dead]. All the souls left their graves except one virgin who had died before the sabbath. [The other souls] told her to come out [of her grave]. She said: "I cannot because my father had been rich and then he became poor and he buried me without clothes." And they [the two living people hiding in the graveyard] heard that some of the souls said: "we should not gather together [to pray] because years ago the living discovered and told the rabbis that we do so, rather each soul should pray in their own grave so that the living will not hear and tell the people [of our prayers]". And they [the living people] were angry with the father and took clothes and clothed the virgin.[1]
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> Judah son of Samuel, *Sefer Hasidim*, early thirteenth century, Germany

This story is one of many exempla (moralizing stories) in *Sefer Hasidim* (Book of the Pious) that refers to the relationship between the living and the dead. Medieval Jews did not think that dead people simply ceased to be or to participate in the lives of their families and local communities. Medieval stories from a range of genres feature dead people making contact with living friends or relatives in order to convey a message or provide comfort.[2] Three specific aspects of the 'lives of the dead' provide helpful context for understanding the import of this exemplum. First, through their souls, the dead continued to possess some sort of consciousness that was contiguous with their living selves. When the dead prayed or made contact with the living in these stories, they are identified as members of their Jewish communities and, in some cases, even individually recognized.[3] Second, as in this exemplum, dead people could communicate – with God, each other, and living people. Moreover, when the dead communicated openly, the living could understand them.[4] Third, though the soul underwent a process of separation from the body, for medieval Jews there remained a link between body and soul. As in this story, the burial location often demarcated a soul's potential sphere of movement. Souls seem to have 'resided' with their corpses in the grave, leaving to pray or make contact with the living but not permanently wandering or floating aimlessly through space like ghosts.[5] The extent to which this understanding of the dead reflected a comprehensive position on the afterlife is debatable. However, in order to function as literary exempla, at a minimum these beliefs must not have directly contravened popular understanding and experience.

The dead, in our story, have agency in the world of the living. Through prayer, they were able to intercede on behalf of the living. This marks an important departure from the Talmudic parable on which this exemplum is based. In *Massekhet Brakhot*, the Talmud recounts the question of whether the dead know about what transpires in the world of the living or the future. "On the eve of *Rosh Hashanah* (the Jewish New Year)… [a pious man] went and slept in the cemetery. He heard two spirits conversing with each other. One said to the other: My friend, let us roam

1 Judah son of Samuel, *Sefer Hasidim*, ed. Judah Wistenetzki (Frankfurt am Main: Wahrmann, 1924), §1543.

2 For example, "The Ethical Will of Judah Asheri," Israel Abrahams and Lawrence Fine, eds., *Hebrew Ethical Wills* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 163–200.

3 For example, Meir son of Barukh of Rothenburg, *Sefer Hilkhot Smakhot haShalem*, ed. Akiva Dov and Jacob Aaron Landa (Jerusalem: Akiva Yosef Press, 1976), §89.

4 Eli Yassif, ed., *Ninety-Nine Tales: The Jerusalem Manuscript Cycle of Legends in Medieval Jewish Folklore* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2013), 176; Eyal Levinson, "Youth and Masculinities in Medieval Ashkenaz" (PhD diss., Bar Ilan University, 2017), 98.

5 *Sefer Hasidim*, §319.

the world and hear from behind the *pargod* what calamity will befall the world.[6] The other spirit said to her: I cannot [go with you] as I am buried in a mat of reeds, but you go, and tell me what you hear." The friend returns and explains which crops will be blighted the following year. The story continues with the spirits having an almost identical exchange the following year. On the third year, after the pious man recounted what he had heard to other people, the spirit buried in the mat of reeds said: "My friend, leave me, [the] words that [have been exchanged] between us have already been heard among the living."[7] Implicit throughout this story is that the woman buried in a mat of reeds, and not in death shrouds, was embarrassed to be seen without proper clothes. The commentator R. Yom Tov Isbilli (c. 1260–1320, known by the acronym Ritva) explained that although the corpse itself could not move, spirits appear with the image of their corpses. Thus, the improperly clothed spirit was too embarrassed to leave the grave dressed only in a mat of reeds.[8]

While the structure of the Talmudic story is closely mirrored in the high medieval exemplum, there are some important differences between the texts. First, unlike in the Talmud, in the medieval story the dead did not predict the future, but rather attempted to intercede to help themselves and the members of their communities. Second, while the Talmud makes no mention of the status of the woman's family, in the medieval story the inadequate burial shrouds were attributed to her father's poverty. Finally, in the Talmud, though the dead woman's mother eventually finds out that she is buried in a mat of reeds, nothing is done to remedy the situation. However, the medieval story implies that the woman's body was exhumed in order to properly clothe her corpse in shrouds before reburying her. In the medieval world, the importance of death shrouds went far beyond the traditional respect for the corpse, and had become sufficiently important that it was conceivable, if uncommon, to exhume a corpse to dress it properly.[9]

This relationship between the living person and their corpse ties into a range of beliefs about the nature of the body, the afterlife, and the world-to-come in medieval Ashkenaz. These beliefs had implications for what happened to the corpse after burial. The corpse continued to bear traces of the life lived by the person even after burial, and so there was a trend to mete out physical punishments mirroring the four biblical death penalties: stoning, burning, beheading, and strangulation. For example, Eleazar of Mainz made very specific requests in his testament, written before he died on the first day of *Rosh Hashanah* in 1357. He instructed that "at a distance of thirty cubits from the grave, they shall set my coffin on the ground, and drag me to the grave by a rope attached to the coffin. Every four cubits they shall stand and wait awhile, doing this in all seven times so that I may find atonement for my sins." [10] This request, made in an effort to be resurrected free of sin, demonstrates the belief in the link between body and soul that endured in death.

6 Rashi explains that the *pargod* is the partition that separates the Divine Presence from the world.

7 Babylonian Talmud, *Massekhet Brakhot*, 18b.

8 Ritva, *Massekhet Brakhot,* 18b.

9 Jacob son of Moses, *Leket Yosher. Pesakim uMinhagim*, ed. Jacob Freimann (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kaufmann, 1904), 1: §2. See also: Jaume Riera i Sans, "Fosas vaciadas: exhumación de restos judíos en la Edad Media," in *Et amicorum: estudios en honor al Profesor Carlos Carrete Parrondo*, ed. Efrem Yildiz (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2019), 287–93.

10 *Midrash Rabbah*, §65.

Medieval people were preoccupied with how the physical breakdown of the body after death could be reconciled with ultimate resurrection in the world-to-come.[11] Because of the ardent belief in resurrection, death did not mark the final end of a person's participation in the Jewish world. While the body might change after death and then after burial, to some extent the person would always be embodied. Thus, when the dead returned to convey a message, they were often identifiable. Though there were some parallels in the theological questions occupying high medieval Christian theologians and Jewish authors, there are notable differences between Jewish and Christian understandings and treatment of corpses at this time. Most fundamentally, the Christian practice of dividing the corpse up after death for ease of transport to distant gravesites was anathema to medieval Jews.

However, for both Jews and Christians, the theological and the practical met in the idea that the body contained active power even after death. Medieval saints, monks, and kings were often considered not altogether dead until long after their burial. This is reflected in the culture of reliquaries as well as in stories of the corpses of saints and kings performing miracles on the way to the grave.[12] For Jews too, the corpse had an impact after death, though this impact was less immediately healing. Torah learning stopped in the immediate vicinity of a corpse,[13] and the water in the house where a person had died was deemed dangerous to drink.[14] As is still practiced today, those of priestly descent (*kohanim*) were not allowed to be in the same enclosed space as a corpse.[15] Moreover, reverence for the practices of marking the graves of the deceased with stones, notes, and candles, as well as the enduring practice of pilgrimage to the graves of rabbis, is indicative of the long-lasting power of the deceased.[16] Jewish attitudes toward death and beliefs about the afterlife were both informed by and developed distinctly from contemporary local Christian beliefs.

Ultimately, death in medieval Ashkenaz did not mark the end of participation in communal Jewish life. The role of cemeteries, whose layout often reflected the social make-up and hierarchy of the community, cemented the importance of the dead in the lives of Jews in the medieval world.[17] Cemeteries were used not only for burials and funerals, but also for a range of memorial rites and communal gatherings invoking the assistance of the dead.[18] In some instances, including the above exemplum, death even enhanced people's involvement in communal life as intercessory prayer demonstrated awareness of and engagement with the affairs of the living.

11 David Shyovitz, "'You Have Saved Me from the Judgement of Gehenna': The Origins of the Mourner's Kaddish in Medieval Ashkenaz," *AJS Review* 39 (2015): 49–73.

12 Julia Smith, "Relics: An Evolving Tradition in Latin Christianity," in *Saints and Sacred Matter: The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond,* eds. Cynthia J. Hahn and Holger A. Klein, Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Symposia and Colloquia (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2015), 41–60.

13 Eleazar son of Judah, *Sefer haRokeah haGadol* (Jerusalem: S. Weinfeld, 1960), Hilkhot Avelut §313.

14 Shimshon son of Tzadok, *Sefer Tashbetz Katan* (Warsaw, 1901), §442.

15 Yaakov son of Moshe Levi Moelin, *Shut Maharil*, ed. Yitzhok Satz (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 1979), §65.

16 Ivan G. Marcus, *The Jewish Life Cycle: Rites of Passage from Biblical to Modern Times* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2004), 213–14; Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael: Mekorot ve-Toldot* (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 2007), 3: 140–151.

17 Avriel Bar-Levav, "We Are Where We Are Not: The Cemetery in Jewish Culture," *Jewish Studies* 41 (2002): 15–46.

18 Nathanja Hüttenmeister and Andreas Lehnardt, "Newly Found Medieval Gravestones from Magenza," in *Death in Jewish Life: Burial and Mourning Customs among Jews of Europe and Nearby Communities*, eds. Stefan C. Reif, Andreas Lehnardt, and Avriel Bar-Levav (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 213–24; Elliott Horowitz, "Speaking to the Dead: Cemetery Prayer in Medieval and Early Modern Jewry," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1999): 303–17.

Further Reading

- Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Sylvie Anne Goldberg, *Crossing the Jabbok: Illness and Death in Ashkenazi Judaism in Sixteenth- through Nineteenth-Century Prague*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Ephraim Kanarfogel, *Peering Through the Lattices: Mystical, Magical, and Pietistic Dimensions in the Tosafist Period*. Detroi: Wayne State University Press, 2000.
- Lucia Raspe, "Sacred Space, Local History, and Diasporic Identity: The Graves of the Righteous in Medieval and Early Modern Ashkenaz." In *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History: Authority, Diaspora, Tradition*, edited by Ra'anan Boustan, Oren Kosansky, and Marina Rustow, 147–63. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.
- David I. Shyovitz. *A Remembrance of His Wonders: Nature and the Supernatural in Medieval Ashkenaz*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.