

What Do the Dead Know?

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This week's Torah portion begins with the words "after the death," referring to the death of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu. I appreciate the chance to contribute this week's commentary, since I'm currently teaching a course titled "Death, Dying, and the Dead" at JTS. Much of the course is about Jewish death rituals, but I also aim to convince my students that Jewishness per se is inconceivable without some notion of the continuing presence of the dead in the world of the living. The tradition for the most part seems to take this continued presence for granted, though questions arose about exactly how it manifests.

A brief Hasidic tale reflects some skepticism about the extent to which the presence of the dead is like that of the living. I heard it from my friend Rabbi Shimon Schneebalg, a neighbor on the Lower East Side. It is said that the Rebbe of Lelev had the practice of giving his deceased father-in-law *aliyos*, that is, calling him to recite the blessings over the reading of a section of the Sabbath Torah portion. The son-in-law claimed that he was able to hear his father-in-law pronounce the blessings, and it was further said that the congregants reported hearing the son-in-law respond "*omeyn*." When the Rebbe of Ger was told about this practice, his response was "*Takke? Me zol im gebn hagbeh*," that is, they should see if his father-in-law can lift up the Torah scroll. So maybe it's easier to talk to your own dead than to believe that others talk to theirs!

We should not, in any case, suppose that the idea of death as at least partial oblivion is entirely a modern aberration. As long ago as the Rabbinic period and doubtless long before, the question whether the dead had any consciousness, let alone agency, was being actively debated. The Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 18), famously debates this issue. I quote from the ArtScroll elucidation: "R' Chiya and R' Yonasan

were walking in a cemetery, and R' Yonasan's *tsitsis* were dragging over the graves. Whereupon R' Chiya said to him: 'Lift up your garment, lest the dead say: "Tomorrow they will be joining us and now they mock us!"' (The mockery referred to here has to do with the mitzvah of tzitzit: by letting his fringes touch the ground, R' Chiya suggests, R' Yonasan would be in effect teasing the dead, reminding them that they are no longer able to place these fringes on their own bodies and indeed, can no longer fulfill any mitzvot themselves.) ". . . R' Yonasan said to him: But do [the dead] know so much about what is going on in this world? But it is written [in Kohelet] 'For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing at all.'"

In the course of the ensuing discussion, one attempt to prove that the dead remain aware is brought as a *baraita*, that is, a statement attributed to the tannaim who are the authorities of the Mishnaic period. Remarkably, while most such statements quoted in the Babylonian Talmud tend to be short, declarative, and deal with halakhic issues, this one (beginning at Berakhot 17b) is an extended folktale.

It happened that there was a certain pious man who gave a dinar to a poor man on the eve of Rosh Hashanah in a year of famine, and his wife reproved him for it, so he went and spent the night in a cemetery. There he heard two spirits conversing with each other. Said one to the other: My friend, let us roam the world and hear from behind the [Divine] curtain what misfortune is to come to the world this year. Her friend replied: I cannot come with you, because I am buried in a matting of

reeds [apparently, this spirit didn't have the right "clothes" to venture beyond the cemetery]. But you go, and come back and relate to me whatever you hear.

Upon her return, the wandering "spirit" relates that she had heard the future foretold: "[T]he crops of anyone who plants this winter at the time of the first rain will be destroyed by hail. Hearing this the pious man went and planted at the time of the second rain. Everyone's crops were destroyed except for his."

The tale continues with the pious man spending a night at the cemetery the following year, and overhearing the same conversation between the two spirits, this time with an opposite future foretold: "I heard that the crops of anyone who plants this winter at the time of the second rain will be blasted by a dry wind. Hearing this he went and planted at the time of the first rain. Everyone's crops were blasted but his."

The pious man's wife—cast, it should be acknowledged, as the villain of this story—wonders why the pious man has "guessed" right about the time of planting two years in a row, and the pious man tells her about the conversations he has overheard. "They say that it was not a few days later when a quarrel broke out between the pious man's wife and the mother of that child whose spirit he had overheard in the cemetery. The wife said to the mother: Come, I will show you your daughter buried in a matting of reeds"—evidently, a putdown to a family that couldn't afford better burial shrouds for their daughter. The third year, when the poor man goes to the cemetery, the spirit buried in reed matting refuses her friend's proposition altogether: "My friend, leave me be! The words that we spoke between ourselves in years past have already been heard among the living."

Thus the spirit declares that she doesn't want to know what next year's crops will be, for such foreknowledge has already been exploited by the living, and instead of gratitude her dead spirit has been insulted ("your daughter is buried in a matting of reeds"). The Talmud takes this as proof that,

indeed, the dead *do* know what goes on in the world of the living.

What's most remarkable about this whole Talmudic passage is perhaps that R' Yonasan never seems even to imagine that the quote from Kohelet might mean what it suggests to a modern reader: that the dead have no awareness whatsoever. For him, it could only suggest their complete divorce from the affairs of the living. The modern idea that "when you die that's it," that nothing remains of the person whatsoever, was likely inconceivable to him.

Is proof from a folktale enough to counter the declarations of Kohelet, traditionally regarded as written by none other than the wise King Solomon? We don't really need to decide, and the question must remain open. But I'm inclined to think that the view of not only most scholars in our tradition, but most of our people throughout the centuries, has been that the dead remain somehow with us—and that without them, we the living wouldn't begin to know how to be Jews.