

CONSCIOUSNESS AFTER DEATH AND REALM OF SPIRITS

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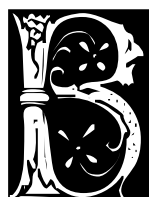
In memory of my grandparents ז"ל



פִּי הַחַיִּים יוֹדְעִים שְׂמִימָתוֹ וְהַמֵּתִים אֵינָם יוֹדְעִים מְאוּמָּה וְאִין עוֹד לָהֶם שְׂכָר פִּי נִשְׁפַּח זְכָרָם (קהלת ט':ה')

*For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing,
neither have they any more a reward;
for the memory of them is forgotten.*

(Ecclesiastes 9:5)



itter are these words of Ecclesiastes. It is believed that this book was written by King Solomon at the end of his life.¹ The mellifluous book of youth, Canticles, had been closed; the well-adjusted tome of noontide of life, Proverbs, had been finally sealed. King Solomon was now at the threshold of death facing the invisible *Beyond*. Did he leave us a sour and painful maxim about the vanity of life after death, irrelevance of post-mortem remuneration, and obscurity in the grave further indicated by the next verse, “Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished,” &c. (Ecclesiastes 9:6)? (These thoughts were echoed centuries later by John Keats in his sonnet: “When I have fears that I may cease to be / {...} / — then on

¹ The order in which King Solomon’s works were composed is a subject of controversy as indicated in the Midrash Rabbah, Canticles 1:10 (מדרש שה"ש רבה [הו"ל בלבוב שנת תרל"ה]): Proverbs, Canticles, Ecclesiastes (Rabbi Ḥiyya Rabbah), or Canticles, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (Rabbi Jonathan). There is also a question whether they were written at once or over a period of time (*ibid.*). The Midrash Zuṭah, Canticles 1 (מדרש שה"ש זוטא [הוצאת שלמה]), and later Rabbi David Ḳimḥi (פ"י רד"ק במלכים א' פרק י"א פסוק מ"א) (באבער בברלין שנת תרנ"ד) [עמוד ה' upheld the opinion of Rabbi Jonathan.

the shore / Of the wide world I stand alone, and think / Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.”²) Or perhaps, on the contrary, did King Solomon try to uplift our spirit with the promise that pages of the unwritten fourth book, *The Book of Eternal Knowledge*, would hereafter open to us?

The classical Jewish commentaries to this verse (9:5) seem³ — at least on the surface — to support the notion that the dead are unconscious. Indeed, in the Scripture itself, the state of death is described as slumber: “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2); “So man lies down, and rises not: till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep” (Job 14:12; see also Job 3:13); “Awake and sing, you that dwell in dust,” &c. (Isaiah 26:19; *cf.* Jeremiah 51:39 & 51:57). A sleeping person is certainly unaware of what is happening.⁴ Besides, “there is no work, nor device, nor *knowledge* (דעת), nor wisdom in the grave,” &c. (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Furthermore, had not Job lamented (14:21): “His sons come to honor, and he knows it not; and they are brought low, but he perceives it not of them”?

The phrase under consideration — “know not any thing” (אינם יודעים מאומה) — appears to convey that meaning. The Targumim too,⁵ starting with the first occurrence of מאומה (“any thing”) in Genesis (22:12), generally translate this word with its Aramaic equivalent מדעם (this exact word [מַדְעָם = מַבְכָּר] is also used in the well-known Peshiṭta translation for rendering מאומה of this verse in Ecclesiastes into Syriac, an ancient dialect of Aramaic). It follows, then, that utter oblivion is manifested in this verse of Ecclesiastes.

² John Keats, *Complete Poems*, ed. J. Stillinger (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 166.

³ עיין פירושי רש"י ואבן עזרא על פסוק זה ועיין פירש"י בנדה דף ל"א ע"א ד"ה מראה העין: „שאע"פ שנבראת העין מן האב והאם אינו רואה תדע שהרי המת יש לו עינים ויש לו שפתים ויש לו אוזנים ואינו רואה ולא שומע ולא מדבר". הגה בשלמא „לא מדבר" דמת אינו יחתוך בשפתיו אבל מנא ליה לרש"י „ואינו רואה ולא שומע" שהרי ב' דברים האלה אינם ניכרים לעיני כל חי (ובפרט לפי מ"ש בשבת דף קנ"ב ע"ב וז"ל א"ר אבהו כל שאומרים בפני המת יודע עד שיסתם הגולל וכו' עכ"ל), ולמה לא נאמר שמתים רואים וגם שומעים.

⁴ אמנם יחידי סגולה יש להם הכרה גדולה גם בשינתם כמוזכר בפ"א אלף למטה שבספר מטה אפרים השלם (הו"ל בווארשא שנת פר"ת) סימן תקצ"ח אות א' דף נ"א ע"ב: „ומ"ש שהאר"י ז"ל היה ישן אחר חצות הלואי שיהי' ביכלתנו לעשות כמעשהו בהקיץ אחד מני אלף ממה שהוא ז"ל היה מתקן בשינתו”.

⁵ The Targum on Ecclesiastes has not been considered here, inasmuch as it offers a detailed explication of Rabbi Ḥiyya’s doctrine (that will be further discussed in this article), which, unless the Targum is of later Talmudic origin, would almost certainly be known to his colleague Rabbi Jonathan. In fact, its peculiar phraseology closely parallels that of the Midrash Ruth ha-Neelam cited later on.

As early a source as the Septuagint, which, too, may offer connotations implied by ancient Jewish Sages, merely renders the Hebrew term מאומה as οὐδέν (*nothing*)⁶ — the word composed of οὐδέ ([*and*] *not*) and εἶς (*one*). A deeper understanding of this Greek word may be derived through an analysis of the atomistic doctrine of Leucippus and Democritus. These early Greek philosophers, perhaps the harbingers of Isaac Newton's theory of absolute space, believed that the universe consists of atoms (undividable particles) and empty space or vacuum. It is important to note that Democritus, employing the same term as the Septuagint, "calls space by these names — 'the void,' 'nothing,' and 'the infinite,' while each individual substance he calls 'thing' [*i.e.*, 'nothing' *without* 'no'], the 'compact' and 'being.'"⁷

Notwithstanding the personal religious convictions of Democritus, we can draw some significant linguistic insights from his words. In Greek language, the word τόπος (*space*) that he used primarily indicates *place*, corresponding to מקום in Hebrew, which, of course, is also one of the appellations of the Omnipresent.⁸ Further, he had maintained that this word is tantamount to *nothing*, though it might be more accurate to translate *nothing* in the citation above as *emptiness*, which, at least for a Jewish reader, manifestly hints at the cosmological concept of primordial metaphysical emptiness (הלל) and also at the presence of God therein⁹ who, too, is described as אין (*Nothingness*)¹⁰ or אין סוף (*Infinite*, cf. "the infinite" [ἄπειρος] of Democritus above and the Gnostic name

⁶ The word מאומה has slightly different translations in the Septuagint. For instance, the first time it appears in Genesis 22:12, it is translated as μηδέν. It is again translated this way in Ecclesiastes 7:14; in three other places in Ecclesiastes it is rendered as above.

⁷ This is the passage by the Neoplatonist Simplicius in his annotations to Aristotle's *De Caelo* as quoted by G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield in *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), 2nd ed., p. 414. The original rare fragment (p. 413) is reproduced herein: Δημόκριτος... προσαγορεύει δὲ τὸν μὲν τόπον τοῖσδε τοῖς ὀνόμασι, τῷ τε κενῷ καὶ τῷ οὐδενὶ καὶ τῷ ἀπειρῷ, τῶν δὲ οὐσιῶν ἑκάστην τῷ τε δεινὶ καὶ τῷ ναστῷ καὶ τῷ ὄντι.

⁸ כתוב במדרש רבה המפורש (הוצאת מכון אור תורה בבני ברק שנת תשס"ה) ח"ב פרשה ס"ח אות ט' עמוד פ"ו ד"ה ויפגע וז"ל ר' הונא בשם ר' אמי אמר, מפני מה מכנין שמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא וקוראין אותו מקום, שהוא מקומו של עולם ואין עולמו מקומו, מן מה דכתיב (שמות ל"ג, כ"א) „הנה מקום אתי” הוי הקדוש ברוך הוא מקומו של עולם ואין עולמו מקומו עכ"ל, וכ"כ רב מנשה בן ישראל ז"ל בספרו נשמת חיים (הו"ל על ידי עם הגהות ויותר מאלף תקונים בשנת תשס"ח) מאמר א' פרק א' ד"ה השני בז"ל ואם נקרא בפי חז"ל מקום שהוא מקומו של עולם בודאי שאין לו קץ ותכלית ולא גבול וכן כתב הרמב"ם ביסודות התורה ועקריה עכ"ל (וע"ע שם במאמר ב' פרק ד' ד"ה ועתה).

⁹ עיין הסבר גדול בענין זה בספר עץ חיים (הוצאת מקור חיים בירושלים שנת תר"ע) היכל א' היכל א"ק שער א' ענף ב' דרוש עגלים ויושר דף י"א ע"ב ד"ה דע.

¹⁰ כך בספר זהר (הו"ל בוילנא שנת תרמ"ב) בראשית ח"א דף רמ"ו ע"ב מכונה בורא עולם בשם „אין” סתם ולא „אין סוף”.

for God, “The Infinite” [’Απέραντος]). Thus, it may be inferred that the words of the Septuagint, καὶ οἱ νεκροὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν γινώσκοντες οὐδέν, could be read (preserving the Greek double negative) as “the dead do not know *Nothing*,” implying that humans lose the awareness of the Omnipresent in the realm of the dead.

Besides, מאומה can also be translated as *defect* or *corruption*, as indicated by the Targumim to Genesis 39:23. There מאומה is rendered as סורחן, similar to מאומה in Daniel 1:4 and Job 31:7, where it has been associated with מום (*blemish* or *blot*).¹¹ It stands to reason, therefore, that the verse (9:5) in Ecclesiastes may also mean that the deceased do not recognize the calamity of death, *i.e.*, dwell in a state of unconsciousness.

Closely connected herewith is the passage by Rabbi Joseph Ḥayyim of Baghdad in his book *Ben Yehoyada* (בן יהוידע — *The Son of Jehoiada*). He discussed there a number of Talmudic stories in which the deceased appeared to living people in their sleep. Nevertheless, he argued that even in those preternatural dreams the dead were only phantasms. Following the final story,¹² which involved a thievish innkeeper and his departed father, Rabbi Joseph Ḥayyim concluded his exposition by writing these words: “In accordance with what has been shown earlier, here, too, it may be said that, after all, the father of the aforesaid man [the innkeeper] had turned into dust and had neither knowledge, nor sensation. Rather, it was Satan who had appeared as that man’s father in his dream and thus spoke to him.”¹³

Particularly pronounced on the issue of posthumous cognizance is the opinion explicated by Rabbi Joseph Solomon Delmedigo in his famous work *Mazref la-Hokhmah* (מצרף לחכמה — *The Fining Pot for Wisdom*): “It may be said that Rabbi Nissim Gerondi¹⁴ apparently supported the view of Maimonides that the reason for going out to a cemetery is to convey the message that we are regarded as dead before God.¹⁵ Indeed, Maimonides did not hold the opinion that the reason is to cause the deceased to ask for mercy on our behalf, inasmuch as in his view the departed do not know of the sufferings of the living. A body in the grave is stone and dust, ‘which will not hearken to the voice of charmers.’¹⁶ Thereby, if the Jewish graves are not around, the graves of

¹¹ עיין פירוש מנחת שי במלכים ב' פרק ה' פסוק ד' מה שהאריך בזה.

¹² יומא דף פ"ג ע"ב ומובא גם בספר נשמת חיים הנ"ל מאמר ג' פרק י"א ד"ה מתוקן.

¹³ ספר בן יהוידע (הו"ל בירושלים שנת תרנ"ח) ח"א באור על מסכת ברכות (דף י"ט ע"א) דף כ"ט ע"א ד"ה והשתא.

¹⁴ ראה פ"ר ר"ן במסכת תענית דף ט"ז ע"א (דף ה' סוף ע"ב בדפי רי"ף) והביא דבריו רב ב"י באו"ח סי' תקע"ט ד"ה ומ"ש ובסדר הגאונים.

¹⁵ רמב"ם הלכות תעניות פרק ד' הלכה ח"י וכ"כ בשו"ע או"ח סימן תקע"ט ס"ק ג'.

¹⁶ An allusion to Psalms 58:6. In this context, the word מלחשים (*charmers*) can be translated

Gentiles may be visited instead, and that is how Rabbi Isserles of blessed memory ruled in his annotations.”¹⁷

Thus, it may be safely concluded that the belief in unconsciousness after death has not been alien to at least some elements within Judaism. Besides, the tenet of utter separation of the world of the living from the world of the dead, if not a lack of consciousness in the latter, has existed since the days of hoary antiquity. Even the ancient Egyptians who, as we know, were exceedingly possessed with the quest for immortality harbored dismal skepticism. For instance, the harper’s song from the tomb of King Intef (𓆎𓅓𓏏𓏏) reads: “None comes from there, / To tell of their state, / To tell of their needs, / To calm our hearts, / Until we go where they have gone!” This is followed by the poignant refrain: “Lo, none who departs comes back again!”¹⁸ (The idea that was repeated in the XVII century by William Shakespeare in Hamlet’s monologue [*Hamlet*, Act III, Scene I]: “The undiscover’d country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns.”¹⁹) Superficially at least, it echoes the words of Job, “I shall go the way whence I shall not return” (16:22), the vindication of King David, “But now he is dead... I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me” (II Samuel 12:23), and the question of Ecclesiastes (3:22) — “[F]or who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?”

After the Bible shaped the outlook of the Western civilization, the simple understanding that the dead “know not any thing” was accepted by those Gentiles who, for the most part, were relying on the literal meaning of the Scripture, and whose undisclosed feelings were perhaps best expressed in the piercing lines of the Pre-Raphaelite poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (*The Garden of Proserpine*): “From too much love of living, / From hope and fear set free, / We thank with brief thanksgiving / Whatever gods may be / That no life lives for ever; / That dead men rise up never; / {...} / Only the sleep eternal / In an eternal night.”²⁰

For those Gentiles, however, the biggest challenge to the tenet of finite being came with the advance of Spiritualism (or Spiritism) in the XIX–XX centuries. Although

as *whisperers*, implying that the dead are oblivious to calls of the living.

¹⁷ מצרף לחכמה (הו"ל בווארשא שנת תר"ן) פרק כ"ד דף נ"א ע"ב ד"ה ובפ"ב דתענית.

¹⁸ Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), vol. I, pp. 196–197. I believe this translation to be more faithful to the original hieroglyphic text than the later one by John L. Foster in his *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 179.

¹⁹ *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1999), p. 688.

²⁰ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Selected Poems*, ed. L. M. Findlay (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 78.

a number of *psychics* associated with Spiritualism were proven to be charlatans, its doctrines based both on the Bible and on empirical arguments and physical phenomena still affirmed the perpetuity of life — even after death.²¹ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, became one of the icons of the movement. Until his demise, he was an ardent spiritualist who had written many books and articles on this subject. One of his major works is “The History of Spiritualism,” a two-volume set published in 1926–1927, in which Conan Doyle appeared as “Président d’Honneur de la Fédération Spirite Internationale,” “President of the London Spiritualist Alliance,” and “President of the British College of Psychic Science.” In its first part, he, being deeply fascinated by the Hydesville phenomenon,²² passionately compared interaction with the spirit-world to the workings of a telegraph:

When, however, in the everyday affairs of this world one wishes to test whether a telegraphic wire is in operation, one notices whether a message comes through, and the high or low nature of that message is quite a secondary consideration. It is said that the first message which actually came through the Transatlantic cable was a commonplace inquiry from the testing engineer. None the less, kings and presidents have used it since. So it is that the humble spirit of the murdered pedlar of Hydesville may have opened a gap into which the angels have thronged. {...} However humble the operator at either end, the spiritual telegraph was at last working, and it was left to the patience and moral earnestness of the human race to determine how high might be the uses to which it was put in the future.²³

These lines were written in the aftermath of World War I, when man — armed for the first time in history with rapidly firing weapons, armored vehicles, toxic gases, and powerful explosives — once again chose death over life. Never before had it happened that millions of humans could be obliterated so quickly and almost effortlessly. Shaken intellect demanded a conceivable explanation to those first mighty blazes of horror that two decades later would fade in the conflagration of World War II

²¹ Needless to say, spiritualists were typically aware of the repeated prohibition of necromancy found, for instance, in Leviticus (19:31 & 20:6) and Deuteronomy (18:10–12); their justifications, however, are beyond the scope of this article.

²² On March 31, 1848, two teenage sisters, Kate and Margaret Fox, through a system of rappings allegedly established communication with the spirit of a dead man that haunted their house near Hydesville, New York. That came to be known as the “Hydesville phenomenon.”

²³ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1926), vol. I, pp. 60–63.

and the Holocaust. In consequence, albeit it was incapable to present any sound justification for the bygone inferno, Spiritualism stepped in and offered its appealing consolation — “the spiritual telegraph²⁴ was at last working,” the loved ones had not been lost forever, and death, though it would only disappear in the Messianic age,²⁵ had appeared to lessen its ghastly grip, which lead mollified Conan Doyle to exclaim elatedly that “for those who have seen, however dimly, through the veil, and touched, however slightly, the outstretched hands beyond, death has indeed been conquered.”²⁶

It then certainly behooves us to consider a spectrum of Jewish sources carefully, inasmuch as it is beyond belief that the “spiritual telegraph” of Spiritualism (or similar phenomena) could have escaped a penetrating glance of Jewish Sages. At first, let us turn to the Babylonian Talmud in its opening treatise Berakhoth. Although the pagination of present-day editions has scanty connection with ancient scrolls on which the Talmud used to be inscribed, it is perhaps not a mere coincidence that our inquiry first appears on page eighteen, the number, which in Judaism connotes the state of being alive (חי) as opposed to being dead.

In the beginning, the following story is related in the Talmud. Rabbi Ḥiyya (whose Aramaic name חייא also signifies life) and Rabbi Jonathan (יונתן) were walking in a cemetery, and the fringe (*zizith*) of Rabbi Jonathan’s garment happened to be exposed. In fact, in the Midrash Rabbah,²⁷ the story of Rabbi Ḥiyya (presumably a different Sage) and Rabbi Jonathan unfolded at the funeral of Rabbi Simeon, the son of Jose the son of Leḳunia (שמעון בן יוסי בן לקוניא), when part of Rabbi Jonathan’s *tallith* happened to be lying on the coffin of the deceased Sage.

Rabbi Ḥiyya asked his colleague to conceal the fringe in order not to insult the dead²⁸ (who are unable to perform the precepts). That resulted in an academic dispute. Rabbi Jonathan, who was otherwise recognized for his tactful attitude toward

²⁴ The thought of telegraphic connection with the world of spirits was then very popular. Suffice it to consider the names of periodicals from that era, such as *The Spiritual Telegraph*, *The Yorkshire Spiritual Telegraph*, and *The British Spiritual Telegraph*.

²⁵ כך ראיתי במדרש פסיקתא רבתי (הוצאת מאיר איש שלום בווינא שנת תמ"ר) פרשה ז"ל דף קס"ג ע"ב ד"ה דבר אחר שוש אישי בה' ותגל נפשי וז"ל שוש כשנבלע מלאך המות מן קרבם עכ"ל, וכ"כ בספר נשמות חיים הנ"ל מאמר א' פרק י"א ד"ה ומה בז"ל בן חיי העולם הבא בלא הפסק והם חיים שאין אחריהם מיתה עכ"ל, וכך נראה ממ"ש בלע המות לנצח וגו' בספר ישעיה פרק כ"ה פסוק ח' (אולם עיין במפרשים שם).

²⁶ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The New Revelation* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1918), p. 59.

²⁷ מדרש קהלת רבה (הו"ל בלבוב שנת תרל"ה) פרשה ט' אות ד' דף קכ"ה ע"ב.

²⁸ וכך נפסק להלכה בשו"ע או"ח סימן ג"כ סק"א וביו"ד סימן שס"ז סק"ד.

living people,²⁹ cited the above-mentioned verse of Ecclesiastes (9:5) as proof that the dead know nothing (and thereby cannot be insulted). Then Rabbi Ḥiyya, citing other Scriptural proofs, replied that his companion was unaware of the hermeneutic interpretation that the first part of that verse (“for the living know that they shall die”) refers to the righteous (צדיקים), who even in their death³⁰ are considered *alive*, whereas the second part of the verse (“but the dead know not any thing”) speaks of the wicked (רשעים), who in their lifetime are already counted as *dead* (מתים). It also appears that Rabbi Ḥiyya believed his explanation to be self-manifesting, inasmuch as he recounted, “If you read the Scripture, you have not repeated it,” &c. (אם קרית לא שנית וכו'), implying that a diligent study of the verse could have provided on its own that deeper understanding, which he was presenting to Rabbi Jonathan.

The narrative in the Talmud continued with a sequence of short stories in which various attempts were made to satisfactorily establish the fact that the dead possess knowledge of the hyllic world. The first story took place after the passing of Rabbi Ḥiyya. As his sons started to forget their learning, they had a debate whether Rabbi Ḥiyya was aware of their predicament, and the doubting son proposed that the deceased are only aware of their own sufferings. Was it that Rabbi Ḥiyya’s sons — among things they forgot — could not recall the opinion of their father, could it be that Rabbi Ḥiyya’s position was an isolated viewpoint (דעת יחיד), which was not upheld by other Sages of his time,³¹ or did his doubting son merely elucidate that conversation at the cemetery, which had antecedently taken place between their father and Rabbi Jonathan?

The Talmudic storyline continued with a mystical tale of a certain pious man (חסיד אחד)³² who for three successive years spent the night of Rosh Hashanah in a cemetery, where he repeatedly overheard conversations of two spirits.³³ On that night, one of those

²⁹ תלמוד ירושלמי מסכת שקלים פ"ג סוף הלכה ב' (דף מ"ז טור ג' ובהוצאת תלמוד בבלי בוילנא דף ט' ע"א).

³⁰ עיין בספר דקדוקי סופרים עם הגהות דברי סופרים מאת ר' רפאל נתן נטע ראבינאוויטץ (הו"ל בניו-יורק שנת תשל"ז) כרך א' בברכות כאן עמוד י"ז נוסח הכ"י אצל אותיות ג' וה' (שייך לדף ח"י): „אלו [הצדיקים שאפי' במיתתן קרויין] חיים וכו' אלו [הרשעים שאפי' בחייהן] קרויין מתים”, וכ"כ שם בהגהה ג' וכדומה ע"ע בספר נשמת חיים הנ"ל מאמר א' פרק ה' ד"ה אברהם.

³¹ „ויחיד ורבים הלכה כרבים” ככתוב בברכות דף ט' ע"א ושם מבואר שאז אפילו בנים לא ילכו בעקבות אביהם.

³² This expression usually refers to either Rabbi Judah, the son of Bava, or Rabbi Judah, the son of Ilai (Temurah 15b, Bava Ḳama 103b).

³³ Mention may also be made that authorities are divided on the question whether this incident happened in reality or transpired in a dream. Naḥmanides (עם) (הוצאת עם) believes its authenticity, while others are disposed to consider this story and perhaps all similar accounts as allegories (עיין בפ"י). (הכותב שם דף ח"ם ע"א ד"ה כל ובהדושי מהרש"א שם ובברכות ד"ה מעשה

spirits used to suggest another to “come and wander about the world and hear from behind the Veil what torments are forthcoming to the world” (בואי ונשוט בעולם ונשמע מאחורי) (הפרגוד מה פורענות בא לעולם). Since the other spirit was of a maiden who had been buried in a matting of reeds (במהצלת של קנים), it could not ascend from the grave,³⁴ thereupon the first spirit alone flitted about the world, heard the revelations from behind the Veil, and then reported them back — unaware that the pious man was eavesdropping and taking note.

Eventually, he revealed all the information to his wife who used its details to humiliate the mother of the maiden buried in a matting of reeds, and, because the spirit confined to the grave learned that, the pious man lost his access to those revelations from above. It appears thereof that at least some spirits can: a) journey through the world, b) hear Divine pronouncements about its future, and c) listen to conversations of the living. The refutation, proposed in the Talmud (and mainly targeting the last point), was that the spirits could acquire their information from the newly deceased individuals, which, by definition, implied that the wanderings and revelations from behind the Veil perceived by the spirit in our story were imaginative in nature.

Going back to the initial story of Rabbi Ḥiyya and Rabbi Jonathan, we may perhaps also question its literal meaning, inasmuch as Rabbi Jonathan³⁵ is reported to be of the priestly lineage, and thus, under normal conditions, he was interdicted to walk in a cemetery.³⁶ (Rabbi Ḥiyya certainly would never have allowed such conduct.³⁷ Besides, Rabbi Ḥiyya of our narrative might also have the same priestly pedigree.³⁸) We can say either that other Sages with these names appeared in our story (which is quite possible, inasmuch as in Talmudic literature we find several Masters by the names Ḥiyya and Jonathan), or that we need to understand that account in a figurative sense.

The Talmudic narrative was concluded with two final stories. In the first, a scholar


³⁴ The spirit was embarrassed to appear in front of other souls due to the lack of a proper shroud (שיטה מקובצת על מסכת ברכות דף ח"י ע"ב ד"ה מפני), or could not ascend, since that would only be possible after complete deterioration of flesh, which the matting of reeds was hindering (ציון לנפש חיה בברכות שם ד"ה שאני).

³⁵ כתוב בבבא מציעא דף י' ע"ב וז"ל א"ל [רבי סימאי לרבי יונתן] מבית אביך אתה למד יין ושכר אל תשת אתה ובניך אתך בבואכם וכו' עכ"ל, ולכן מוכח שרבי יונתן היה כהן.

³⁶ מובא בסוטה דף ג"כ ע"א בז"ל כהנת מטמאה למתים ואין כהן מטמא למתים עכ"ל, וכן נפסק להלכה בשו"ע יו"ד סי' שס"ט: „הכהן מוזהר שלא ליטמא במת”.

³⁷ מוזכר בסנהדרין דף ה' ע"ב: „רבי חייא חזייה לההוא גברא דהוה קאי בבית הקברות אמר ליה לאו בן איש פלוני כהן אתה”.

³⁸ במדרש ילקוט שמועוני לספר ישעיה (הו"ל בוילנא שנת תרס"ט) אות תנ"ה דף שצ"ח ע"ב ד"ה למענכם מובא בז"ל רבי נתן כהן אחיה דרבי חייא כד הוה פריש בימא וכו' עכ"ל, וכן במדרש תנחומא (הוצאת שלמה באבער בוילנא שנת תרמ"ה) פרשת חיי שרה אות ו' דף ס' ע"א ד"ה ד"א כתוב וז"ל אמר ר' ברכיה כהן בשם ר' חייא אביו וכו' עכ"ל.

named Zeiri (זעירי), who is elsewhere reported to be a student of Rabbi Ḥiyya,³⁹ visited the *Courtyard of Death* (חצר מות) to learn from his recently deceased hostess (אושפזיכתייה)⁴⁰ the location of the money he had deposited with her. After revealing to Zeiri the exact place, she requested that her cosmetic utensils be sent over by her mother through a woman who would die the following day (and, according to the medieval commentary of Rashi, was seen as nearing demise⁴¹). The new refutation, proposed in the Talmud, suggested that an angel of the dead called *Silence* (דומה) could announce such information to the deceased. The name of this supernatural being may be closely related to the ancient Egyptian term for making pronouncements  (thereby turning its Hebrew equivalent into a euphemism comparable to סגי נהור⁴²), inasmuch as it is reported that *Silence* was formerly a guardian angel of Egypt.⁴³

In the second story, a famed Sage by the name Samuel (שמואל) also went to the *Courtyard of Death* to find the location of orphans' money, which his father Abba, the son of Abba (אבא בר אבא), concealed in the enclosure of the millstones (באמתא דרחיא). Having been dealing with possible allegories thus far, we may presume that the *Courtyard of Death*, an uncommon name for *cemetery* nowhere else found in the core part of the Talmud,⁴⁴ not merely references a graveyard (see the commentary of Rashi *ad. loc.*⁴⁵), but a special mystical space where communication with the dead becomes feasible through spiritual teleportation that preceded by far the “spiritual telegraph” of spiritualists. This would answer the question how could it happen that Samuel, who was also of the priestly lineage,⁴⁶ visited the cemetery, and further explain why he had to ask the deceased where his father was, instead of addressing his father's grave directly.

³⁹ כך הוא בשבת דף קנ"ו ע"א: „כתיב אפינקסיה דזעירי אמרית קדם רבי ומנו רבי חייא”.

⁴⁰ עיין בספר דקדוקי סופרים הנ"ל עמוד ח"י נוסח הכ"י אצל אות ר' (שייך לדף ח"י בברכות): „[אפקיד] זווי גבי [בת אושפזיכתייה]”, וכ"כ בהגהה ר' שם ועוד הביא בהגהה גירסאות „אשלים כסא” ו„אפקיד כסא” במקום „מפקיד זווי”.

⁴¹ פירש"י בברכות דף ח"י ע"ב ד"ה אלמא ידעי: „שידעה זו שזו גוססת ונטויה למות” ועיין בספר דקדוקי סופרים הנ"ל עמוד ח"י בהגהות (שייך לדף ח"י בברכות) אות ת' שהביא הגירסא „בהדי [פלוגי דאתי] למחר”.

⁴² “Having much light,” a common euphemism for blindness (see Berakhoth 58a — רב ששת סגי — cf. “Light of the eyes” [מאור עינים] in Ḥagigah 5b).

⁴³ ספר זהר (הו"ל בוילנא שנת תרמ"ב) שמוות ח"ב דף ח"י ע"א.

⁴⁴ „חצר מות” ראיתי חוץ מזה רק פעם א' בלבד במסכת אבות דרבי נתן (ולא באדר"ן שבהוצאת הש"ס בוילנא אלא בהוצאת שניאור זלמן שעכטער בניו-יורק [הוצאה שניה] שנת תש"ה) הוספה ב' לנוסחא א' פרק ד' דף ע"ט ע"א ד"ה ר' שמעון בן אלעזר אומ' וז"ל הלך אצל חצר מות אצל דומה המלאך שהו[א] ממונה על הנשמות וכו' עכ"ל.

⁴⁵ וכ"כ בערוך (חצר ב'): „פי' בית הקברות חצר שהמתים מוטלין בה”.

⁴⁶ מגילה דף ב"ך ע"א.

Indeed, the *Courtyard of Death* is described⁴⁷ as a mysterious place with a pasture and brook where the aforementioned angel *Silence* shepherds spirits of the dead. In the Midrash Rabbah, we read that Samuel (who apparently visited that place on more than one occasion) averred that inhabitants of the *Courtyard of Death* (הצר מות — an allusion to Hazarmaveth in Genesis 10:26) did not even possess garments of papyri⁴⁸ (cf. the above-mentioned matting of reeds). Abba, the son of Abba, who himself had communicated with the Angel of Death during his lifetime,⁴⁹ answered Samuel's inquiry, furthermore informed him that Samuel was highly esteemed in the nether world, and also said that before long he would die. Another repudiation, proposed in the Talmud, asserted that an announcement could be made before the arrival of an individual standing in high repute to prepare a place for him.

It is significant that at the *Courtyard of Death* Samuel had to make his inquiry thrice: at first he called “Abba,” then “Abba, the son of Abba,” and, finally, “Abba, the son of Abba, the father of Samuel” (בעינא אבא — בעינא אבא בר אבא — בעינא אבא בר אבא דשמואל). The phraseology here resembles a classical invocation and is quite similar to the legendary Abracadabra⁵⁰ array or Shabriri⁵¹ spell of the Talmud,⁵² although applied here in ascending

⁴⁷ מדרש תהלים המכונה שוחר טוב (הוצאת שלמה באבער בוויילנא שנת תרנ"א) מזמור י"א אות ו' דף נ"א ע"ב ד"ה כי צדיק. מוצאתי נוסחאות שכתוב בהן „שמואל אמר" בלי תארים כלל כמו בברכות כאן כגון במדרש רבה בראשית (הוצאת מחברות לספרות בתל-אביב שנת תשט"ז) פרשה ז"ל אות ח' עמוד סד"ר וכן הוא בילקוט שמעוני בראשית (הו"ל בוויילנא שנת תרכ"ד) פרשת נח סימן ס"ב אות ו' דף כ"ה ע"א ד"ה ויקטן.

⁴⁹ ע"ז דף י' ע"ב.

⁵⁰ This curious word has long been suspected to be of the Semitic origin. William Thomas and Kate Pavitt in *The Book of Talismans* (London: Bracken Books, 1993), pp. 111–112, consider it either a composition of the Hebrew words הברכה דברה (“Speak or pronounce the Blessing”; ‘Blessing’ standing for “The Blessed One”) [here and further in this footnote the translations are given by their respective sources], or a derivation from the verse, “God sends forth His lightning to scatter His enemies,” which occurs in a Psalm of David” (the reference to Psalms 18:15 or 144:6). Four definitions are quoted by Erich Bischoff in *The Kabbala* (York Beach: Weiser Books, 1985), p. 59 — אברא כדברא (“Flee like these words”) or, with a slight alteration, אבדא כדברא (“decrease as this word [formula] decreases”), אב רוח דבר (“father, spirit, ‘word’”), and עביד כדבר (“do as decided”); two last explanations are very unlikely as he noted. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan in *Sefer Yetzirah* (York Beach: Weiser Books, 1997), rev. ed., p. XXI, mentioned the Hebrew variation אברא כאדברא (“I will create as I speak”) as a meaning of this word and endeavored to connect it with רבא ברא גברא (“Rava created a man [android]”) of the Talmud (Sanhedrin 65b).

⁵¹ עיין תרגום אונקלוס בבראשית פרק י"ט פסוק י"א שתרגם „הכו בסגורים" במלים „מחו בשבריריא" כלומר בעורון.

⁵² „שברירי ברירי ירי ירי רי" (פסחים דף בק"י ע"א וע"ז דף ב"י ע"ב).

order. In fact, Rabbi Joseph Caro, the author of *Shulhan Arukh* (The Code of Jewish Law), maintained that in order to arrive at the *Courtyard of Death*, Samuel possibly used sacred charms⁵³ (comparable perhaps to the method⁵⁴ of his colleague Rav). Samuel's verbalization appears to be an allusion to the mystical technique, when — similar to the threefold priestly blessing in Numbers (6:24–26) or the angelic treble encomium in Isaiah (6:3) — invocation is repeated thrice.⁵⁵ (Also, if we go back to the story of the pious man, we will recall that he visited the cemetery three times. Note, besides, that in our story of Samuel the concealed money was split into three parts.)

Furthermore, the expression used heretofore by Rabbi Ḥiyya in admonishing Rabbi Jonathan was: “If you read the Scripture, you have not repeated it; if you repeated it, you have not read it a third time; if you read it a third time, they have not explained it to you” (אם קרית לא שנית — אם שנית לא שלשת — אם שלשת לא פירשו לך). Again, we encounter the threefold cyclic verbal pattern. Rabbi Ḥiyya's exact wording recurs only once in the Talmud — that time addressed to Rabbi Ḥiyya himself by Rabbi Judah the Prince.⁵⁶ There it was probably used to mimic Rabbi Ḥiyya's peculiar way of talking, in view of the fact that at the outset of his speech Rabbi Judah also imitated Rabbi Ḥiyya's pronunciation of the latter's proper name. Hence, there is an ample reason to believe that the Sages of the Talmud were deliberately providing us with insights into the set of guidelines by which communication with the world of spirits is achieved. That system, nevertheless, appears to be confined to a few of the elect and its use permitted only at certain times, inasmuch as even the sons of Rabbi Ḥiyya did not or could not make use of its carefully guarded principles.

Afterward, the discussion is brought to a close with three crucial statements. 1) Rabbi Jonathan (who had disbelieved that spirits could converse among themselves) changed his mind. 2) Rabbi Isaac (who had been cited earlier [p. 18b] as saying that worms are as painful to the dead as pricking with a needle to the living) compared remarks about the deceased to remarks about inorganic matter (האבן), since they either do not know or do not care. 3) The Omnipotent inflicts vengeance upon those who slander a departed Jewish scholar (even if the scholar is unaware of the offence). It may be

⁵³ ב"י ביו"ד סימן קע"ט ד"ה אוב וכן הוא בספר נשמות חיים הג"ל מאמר ג' תחלת פרק ז'.

⁵⁴ ב"מ דף ק"ז ע"ב.

⁵⁵ ע"ע פירש"י בשבת דף ס"ו ע"ב ד"ה כל מנייני: „כל לחישות ומפני שכופלין אותן יש ג' פעמים ויש יותר קרי להו מנייני". גם ראה בספר חסידים (הוצאת ישראל בבווננאס איירעס שנת תשי"ג) סימן רז"ל עמודים ע"ח וע"ט: „יש לו לילך על הקברות וישביענו וכו' וכן יאמר שלשה פעמים בקול שנשמע ד' אמות”.

⁵⁶ מו"ק דף ט"ז ע"ב.

mentioned here that the tosafists deemed that the final conclusion of the dispute in Berakhoth had been that the dead are absolutely detached from the world of the living, but, on account of one's supplication, can be *notified* about the nature of the plea addressed to them.⁵⁷

What have we discovered so far? Proponents of comprehensive awareness after death believe that the dead know what happens in proximity to their bodies, can — at least theoretically — wander about the world, hear its upcoming punishments from behind the Veil, listen to conversations of living people, possess certain knowledge of future events, and speak with those eminent living individuals who enter their realm. Opponents of this doctrine maintain that the information that reaches the dead is limited to the knowledge gained from newly deceased persons (possibly including conversations between the departed themselves), angel *Silence*, or special announcements; otherwise they have only awareness of their own sufferings. Everyone seems to agree that the deceased recollect their lifetime actions in the terrestrial world.

For a more thorough and truly compelling understanding, we will now turn to the remarkable book *Nishmath Hayyim* (נשמת חיים — *The Living Soul*), written by Rabbi Menashe ben-Israel, a philosopher, polyglot, polymath, one of the most outstanding Jewish literati of the XVII century, and friend of above-mentioned Rabbi Joseph Solomon Delmedigo.⁵⁸ It is a noteworthy fact that the compilation of *Nishmath Hayyim*, akin to antecedent prophetic works, was shrouded in celestial mystery. In the prefatory epistle to his book, Rabbi Menashe ben-Israel described the striking miraculous experience when at dawn, as stars had grown dim, a Heavenly Messenger had once appeared to him and commanded to write down the manuscript: “Expound publicly the words that are heeded and raise the quill of a fast scribe, for it is incumbent upon you to finish this work and it is time to act... Now I came forth to give you wisdom and understanding. Act and triumph, for I am with you, I will not fail you, nor forsake you. I will go before you, teaching you to advantage, leading you by the way that you

⁵⁷ תוספות בסוטה דף ל"ד ע"ב ד"ה אבותי ועיין בספר דקדוקי סופרים הנ"ל עמוד ח"י בהגהות (שייך לרף ח"י בברכות) אות ח' שנראה שג' התוספות בברכות כאן היתה, אלא כד"י והיינו דלעולם לא ידעי.

⁵⁸ רב מנשה בן ישראל ז"ל הביא אודות יש"ר מקנדיאה וספרו מצרף לחכמה גם בספר נשמת חיים הנ"ל במאמר א' פרק י"ג ד"ה ועתה ובמאמר ב' פרק א' ד"ה עוד וגם במאמר ג' פרק י' ד"ה אשר ופרק י"א ד"ה ואם. וגם יש"ר מקנדיאה הפליג בשבח חברו בסוף הקדמת ספרו נובלות חכמה (הו"ל בבסיליאה שנת שצ"א) ד"ה והנני: „כי אותו לבדו ידעתי איש אמונים בארץ הזאת אב בחכמה ורך בשנים והוא פאר החכמים וצפירת תפארת עמינו בעיני העמים וגם הוא מחבר חיבורים מחוכמים לא נראו כמותם בארצות ובאיים ואתו יום יום ידרשון חכמיהם האלהיים לשמוע חכמתו ונהרו אליו כל הגוים”.

should go. I will give you the treasures of light and hidden riches of secret places.”⁵⁹

Rabbi Menashe ben-Israel further noted⁶⁰ that his book — in fact, a stylistically outstanding work boasting the breadth of theological and historical information — is a full comprehensive encyclopedia of all aspects pertaining to the human soul and its eternity. There, in the second part of *Nishmath Hayyim*, he devoted the entire twenty-second chapter to furnish evidence of post-mortem consciousness and its scope, starting with the recapitulation of the stories of Rabbi Ḥiyya and Rabbi Jonathan, and that of Samuel.⁶¹ Thereupon he proceeded with a truly encyclopedic paragraph⁶² diligently drawn from the traditional sources, which I feel obliged to translate and quote here in its impressive entirety:

It has been asked in the first chapter of Taanith [p. 16a] why a congregation [on fast-days] goes out to a cemetery. The divergent answers were proposed by Rabbi Levi, the son of Ḥama, and Rabbi Ḥanina. One contended that it is to indicate that we are regarded as dead before God, and the other declared that the reason is to cause the deceased to ask for mercy on our behalf. In the treatise Soṭah [p. 34b], it is asked why the verse, “And they ascended by the south, and he came unto Hebron” [Numbers 13:22], does not state “and they came.” According to Rabbah, this teaches us that Caleb alienated himself from the scheme of the spies and went to prostrate himself on the tombs of the Patriarchs, crying out to them: “Pillars of the world! Ask mercy on my behalf that I shall be saved from the plot of the spies!”

In the tenth chapter of the treatise Yevamoth [p. 96b], there is a statement of Rav: “What is the meaning of the verse, ‘I will abide in your tabernacle for ever’ [Psalms 61:5]? Is it feasible that a person inhabits two worlds [since another denotation of עולמים (‘for ever’) is *worlds*]? This rather means that David pleaded with the Holy One, blessed be He: ‘Lord of the world, may it be Your will that in this world a dictum is uttered in my name, thereupon my lips will move in the grave (thereby allowing me to dwell in both worlds).’” Inasmuch as Rabbi Joḥanan declared in the name of Rabbi Simeon, the son of Josedech: “The lips of a scholar, whose dictum is declared in this world, move in the grave.” Rabbi Isaac, the son of a Nazarite, or it might be said, Rabbi Simeon the Nazarite, affirmed this from the verse [Canticles 7:10]: “And the roof of your mouth like the best

⁵⁹ הקדמות ספר נשמות חיים (לעיני בני עמי) ד"ה זמותי.

⁶⁰ ספר נשמות חיים סוף מאמר ב'.

⁶¹ ספר נשמות חיים מאמר ב' פרק ב"ך ד"ה קורא.

⁶² ספר נשמות חיים שם ד"ה גם.

wine... causing the lips of those that are asleep to move” as a heated mass of grapes (*i.e.*, [the contents of] a utensil in which grapes are placed to warm up and efficiently release wine). Resembling the heated mass of grapes that emits fluid when someone places a finger upon it, so, too, scholars’ lips move in the grave when their dicta are declared in this world. Do not think, though, that physical motion takes place there, for the Sages [only] intended to hint at joy and pleasure that a departed experiences when he sees other people benefiting from his dicta — comparable to someone enjoying the lasting aftertaste of a seasoned vintage.

Also notice that in the third chapter of Bava Bathra [p. 58a] there was brought down an incident with Rabbi Banaah to whom Abraham said: “Let him enter [my crypt where I dwell with Sarah] for there is no passion in this world.” In the treatise Kethuvoh, chapter twelve [p. 103a], it was related that every eve of Sabbath at dusk Rabbi [Judah the Prince following his passing] used to revisit his home. In the seventh chapter of Bava Mezia [p. 85b], there is a story of Elijah who testified that he was waking up the Patriarchs so that they could pray every day. In the treatise Sabbath, chapter twenty-three [p. 152b], the workers digging on Rabbi Nahman’s soil were scolded by Rabbi Aḥai, the son of Josiah [who had been interred there]. It is also reported afterward [p. 153a] that Rav instructed Rabbi Samuel, the son of Shilath, to deliver an ardent eulogy for him, inasmuch as he would be present at that oration.

Heretofore [p. 152a] it was declared that when once a man who had no remaining relatives to be comforted passed away in Rabbi Judah’s neighborhood, the latter daily congregated ten men to sit in the deceased’s abode. The departed then appeared to Rabbi Judah in a dream and blessed him: “May your mind be at rest, for you have set my mind at rest.” Additionally, in the Midrash Rabbah, chapter seventy-two,⁶³ the Sages explained that Rachel was buried in the way in order that she might ask for mercy on behalf of exiles.

You will also find in the Midrash Ruth ha-Neelam the following narrative [p. 90a⁶⁴]: “Rabbi Judah, the son of Simon, declared, ‘Happy is he who endeavors to inquire about the spirit-world, his wisdom has no boundary.’ Rabbi Perahjah used to assert: ‘All that time that the body has not been buried in its place, the soul is still here.’ And he constantly strove to gain knowledge of the world of souls. One day, as he

⁶³ בדפוסים שלנו הוא בפרשה פ”ב אות י’ (או י”א) ד”ה ויצב כגון במדרש רבה המפורש (הוצאת מכון אור תורה בבני ברק שנת תשס”ה) ח”ב עמוד צד”ק.

⁶⁴ זהר חדש (הוצאת מוסד הרב קוק בירושלים [עם הגהות ר’ ראובן מרגליות] שנת תשי”ג) מדרש רות דף י’ ע”א.

was walking in a field, he found a corpse under a tree. He discovered that the body was of a Jew, he noticed the straps of *tefillin* and Haggadic scroll. ‘Surely he was a scholar,’ exclaimed Rabbi Peraḥjah. Hence, he occupied himself with the scholar’s burial, first hiding the body, then going to town to prepare a shroud and funeral. He assembled people and mourned over the scholar, expending in the course of his arrangements all assets that he had. After the body was concealed and buried, the soul of that scholar ascended to the Heavenly Academy. There it was told: ‘Go and repay good to the person who had done it to you.’

“It happened once that Rabbi Peraḥjah was sitting at the gate of Lydda. He was despondent because he suffered great poverty. A man [who was nobody else but that departed scholar] approached him and said: ‘Rabbi, travel with me to a certain place, and if we jointly study the Torah on the way there, I shall give you silver vessels.’ ‘Let us go,’ replied Rabbi Peraḥjah. While they were traveling, Rabbi Peraḥjah started to discourse on the verse, ‘For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing’ [Ecclesiastes 9:5], and recounted: “For the living know that they shall die” — this refers to the righteous, “but the dead know not any thing” — this speaks of the wicked.’ The man exclaimed, ‘I swear to you, Rabbi, that in that world even the wicked are endowed with knowledge. They are aware of their sufferings and sufferings of others, they recollect their lifetime deeds, they recognize the glory of the righteous and chastisements of the wicked!’ ‘If so,’ rejoined Rabbi Peraḥjah, ‘what is the meaning of “but the dead know not any thing”?’ The man responded: ‘The verse is revealing the ways of this world, inasmuch as the righteous, who are called *the living*, contemplate and understand that they will die and prepare themselves to stand trial because there are the *judgment* and the *Judge*, as it is said: “and the living will lay it to his heart” [Ecclesiastes 7:2]. In contrast, the guilty, who are called *the dead*, do not recognize, nor pay heed to or consider the workings of the nether world; they are not among the living. That world is the world of souls and spirits. It is the world inhabited by the spirits of human beings with resembling appearances that inform each other and know what shall come to pass in this world. There they strive to comprehend the majesty of their Master veiled in the mantle of the nether world.’”

Also there [p. 84a], in a commentary to the verse, “And Naomi had a kinsman of her husband’s” [Ruth 2:1], you will find the story of a man who came in a dream to Rabbi Zemiraah⁶⁵ and thanked him for teaching the Torah to his son: “May

⁶⁵ ע"ע בספר נשמות חיים מעשה כזה ברבי עקיבא המובא שם במאמר ב' פרק ז"ך ד"ה ועל.

the Holy One, blessed be He, appease you the way you appeased me — since on the day my son learnt a first verse, I was freed from chastisement; on the day he pronounced the *Shema* prayer, I was freed from daytime and nighttime castigations; and on the day he became a rabbi, my punishments ceased completely.” In addition, you will find references thereto in the upcoming chapters.

Nevertheless, it is sufficiently clear that becoming a disembodied spirit does not turn someone into an omniscient being. “Although the dead *know*, do not assume that they *know everything* that took place in this world and what will happen to their children and relatives,” wisely pointed Rabbi Menashe ben-Israel toward the end of the twenty-second chapter.⁶⁶ Ascribing absolute knowledge to the deceased certainly would be illogical, inasmuch as only the Omnipresent knows everything. Accordingly, “the dead do not know *Nothing*” of the Septuagint cited above could also mean that the door opening into the extraterrestrial world of the deceased does not and, in fact, cannot lead to the ultimate *Knowledge*. This might explain puzzlement and disappointment of many among the aforementioned spiritualists who had naïvely regarded their “spiritual telegraph” as the direct line to all-knowing apparitions.

Capping up his examination of the Jewish sources at the conclusion of that chapter of *Nishmath Hayyim*, Rabbi Menashe ben-Israel remarked: “These are the things that an eye has not seen, and they are among the deepest mysteries of the universe for ‘who has ascended up into heaven or descended.’⁶⁷ Rather, they were transmitted to us by the Sages of blessed memory to whom all secrets had been revealed, and we are guided by what their eyes had perceived.”⁶⁸ The additional minutiae of what the dead know are further discussed in the pages of his magnificent book, but that is perhaps a theme for a separate essay. Our mortal intellect — irrespective of how diligently we may try to study the ancient wisdom — will never fully grasp the meaning of life *beyond* death. For this reason, the adage of Hillel, “Judge not a friend until you have reached his place,”⁶⁹ also perfectly applies to the nether world, where denizens dwell in a different state of existence.



Have you, gentle reader, ever stood at the seashore? A weighty texture of water-canvas stretches for endless miles ahead, stitching at the horizon into an invisible hemline of

⁶⁶ ספר נשמות חיים מאמר ב' פרק ב"ך ד"ה אמנם.

⁶⁷ An allusion to Proverbs 30:4.

⁶⁸ ספר נשמות חיים מאמר ב' פרק ב"ך ד"ה אמנם.

⁶⁹ אבות פרק ב' משנה ד' (או ה'): „ואל תדין את חברך עד שתגיע למקומו”.

the firmament. Futile are humankind's attempts to triumph over marine depths: aqualungs and bathyscaphs will never give people a permanent residency in the aqueous world. Perhaps, this is what the Jewish Sages also implied when they contended that our world is comparable to the dry land and the world to come — to the sea.⁷⁰ A person gets a permit to enter the nether world by relinquishing the present human shell, freeing oneself from the trammels that bind the soul to the body, and undergoing a total transfiguration.⁷¹ “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Only then, similar to the succession of thoughts in our terrestrial world as one looks at the dyed cord of *tallith*,⁷² an individual will be able to ascend nebulous stairs leading from the sea to the firmament, and therefrom — to the celestial Throne of the Lord where tiny aureorean lights of souls are amalgamated with the grand glow of the Eternity.



⁷⁰ כ"כ בכמה מדרשים כגון בילקוט שמעוני קהלת (הו"ל בוילנא שנת תרס"ט) אות תתקס"ז דף תקמ"א ע"א ד"ה מעות.

⁷¹ ע"ע בבאור המלות למלבי"ם שבפי' קשת ומגן באיוב פרק י"ד פסוק י"ד שכתב וז"ל כאילו אז יחליף שמלותיו הקודמים ויתהוה בריאה אחרת תמורתו, כמו הפורחים שהיו תחלת רימה ותולעה ויתעטפו במעטפה ואח"כ יתחדשו להיות בעלי כנף וכו' עכ"ל.

⁷² מנחות דף ג"ם ע"ב.