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Intervening Spirits of the Dead?!?! In the Talmud--Yes!

Dear Friends,

Greetings. I continue to take such great pleasure in our study. The email group is well over 200 people now and we have a marvelous variety of viewpoints expressed there. I treasure each of your insights.

The current passage is generously sponsored by Mickey Rosen in memory of his grandfather's yartseit. Mickey writes: I dedicate this study to my grandfather Naftali Rosenkrantz who instilled in me a love for Torah and the Hebrew Language.

Thank you for making Maqom part of your mitsvah of tzedakah. May his memory be a blessing.

This next passage from the Talmud may surprise you. In modern-day America, we have generally been taught that Jews don't believe in vicarious atonement, the intervention of dead souls on our behalf, angels or the like. Yet, as you'll see, the sages are quite comfortable with these concepts. If *they* were comfortable with them as authentically Jewish, perhaps it is time for us to reconsider them, as well.

Bavli Taanit 16a, Steinsaltz, Volume 14, pp. 15-18:

And why do we carry the ark out to the open area of the town?

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: To say: "We had a hidden utensil, and it was put to shame on account of our sins."

And why do we cover ourselves with sackcloth?

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said: To say: "Behold we are regarded as animals."

And why do we place burnt ashes on the ark?

Rabbi Yehudah ben Pazi said: As if to say: "I will be with him in trouble. (Psalm 91:15)"

Reish Lakish said: "In all their afflictions He was afflicted. (Isaiah 63:9)"

Rabbi Zera said: At first, when I would see the Rabbis placing burnt ashes on the ark my entire body would tremble.

And why do we place ashes on the head of each and every one?

Rabbi Levi bar Hama and Rabbi Hanina disagreed about this. One said: "Behold, we are regarded before You as ashes." And one said: So that He may remember the ashes of Isaac on our behalf. What is [the difference] between them? [The difference] between them is ordinary earth.

Why do we go out to the cemetery?

Rabbi Levi bar Hama and rabbi Hanina disagreed about this. One said: "Behold, we are regarded before You as dead." And one said: So that the dead may petition for mercy on our behalf." [The difference] between them is the graves of non-Jews.

What is [meant by] "Mount Moriah"?

Rabbi Levi bar Hama and Rabbi Hanina disagreed about this. One said: The mountain from which instruction went out to Israel. And one said: The mountain from which fear went out to the nations of the world.

Background

As you may recall from the last passage, we are exploring the items listed mnemonically as "town square, ark, sackcloth, ashes, ashes, burial and Moriah" in turn. These are major components of the fast day customs. We already did "town square" and now the passage moves on to the "ark".

The Ark and the Sackcloth

The ark is brought out to shame it, as it were. This may be difficult to grasp since, in American culture what is exposed is honored. The more exposure one receives in the media, for example, the more meritorious it is generally deemed. The sages take it the opposite way. Think of diamonds in a jeweler's case. The more precious the gems, the more layers of protection they are given. Or imagine how you would feel if your spouse paraded naked down the street (God forbid!). This is something that your relationship of special intimacy makes inappropriate and so would engender great shame and anguish. This is in some ways analogous to the ark being brought out into the street. This is how the sages relate to the Torah. By bringing the ark out of the synagogue, they are showing how much shame has been brought upon it. Imagine your synagogue's Torah scrolls were sitting out on the sidewalk in front of the building. It would be shocking. That's what happens when the ark is brought out.

The sackcloth is self-explanatory. The shirt is made of animal hair and so the participants are making shaming themselves in this way. The explanations of these two symbols are obvious and uncontested.

The Ashes on the Ark and on the Head

The sages provide two different texts to explain this custom. Both hearken back to a well-known concept in Judaism: God is with the Jewish people in their affliction. God went down with us to Egypt and came up out of slavery with us. Thus, God (represented by the Torah within the ark) suffers when we suffer.

The ashes on the head can either simply be a form of degradation (either ash or simply dirt) or they can be a reminder of ashes and relate specifically to the image of Isaac on the altar, the ram that took his place and the ashes of that offering which saved the Jewish people. This is a prime example of the principle of *zekhut avot*, the "merit of the fathers". Our patriarchs did such incredible, righteous deeds that they redound to our credit to this very day. We are blessed with an "endowment" in the bank, as it were. Thus, when we put these ashes on our heads, we are drawing on this account. (Jacob Neusner writes often--and well--about this concept. See his book *Androgynous Judaism: Masculine and Feminine in the Dual Torah*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993.)

The Cemetery

After the liturgy has concluded on the fast day, the people go to the cemetery either to remind themselves of their own mortality or to persuade the dead to intervene on behalf of the living. If the former is the motivation, then any cemetery will do. If the latter is the motivation, then only a Jewish cemetery will be effective.

Mount Moriah

To understand this part of the passage, you need to know the Hebrew. To see and to fear sound a great deal alike in Hebrew. The sages make puns on the mountain's name. One says it is the place from whence teaching (Hora'ah sounds like Moriyah) went forth for Israel. The other says that it the mountain from which fear (Morah sounds like Moriyah) went forth to the whole world. This explanation is brought here because Mount Moriah is the place where Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac.

Discussion Questions

1. The technical phrase, "*ika beinaihu*", "the difference between them", is used several times in this passage. It explains the distinctions between the viewpoints of scholars where the practical outcome of their disagreement is unclear. This is the later, anonymous layer of the Talmud entering and reconciling points of view. Look at the examples in this passage. Do the solutions offered strike you as genuine reports of true practical differences or ingenious inventions to keep all the opinions offered without sacrificing any?
2. God is portrayed as suffering with the Jewish people. Does this cast God in a less powerful light? If God is suffering with us, why does God not bring the rain? Or is it that God is suffering because we have sinned and therefore does not bring the rain?
3. Where else in Jewish texts or Jewish practice have you encountered the concept of *zekhut avot*? How might this concept work for you in your life and Jewish practice? Where else in Judaism (if ever) have you encountered the notion of dead spirits intervening on behalf of the living? Did you know this was a Jewish belief? How do you feel about it? Will you make (or have you already made) use of it?
4. Regarding the explanation of Mount Moriyah: Is Judaism and its narratives a teaching for the Jewish people or an awe-inspiring resource for every nation? Is it both? Explain.

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