

RABBINIC CONCEPTIONS ABOUT DEATH.*

BY JULIUS J. PRICE.

ON the Jewish New Year's eve, according to Jewish tradition, the Almighty God is supposed to have two sets of books set before him¹ in which are to be written the names of those who are to meet with death during the coming year, and the names of those more fortunate who are to be blessed with life. It is an oft-repeated statement in the Talmud that one may meet death by one of nine hundred and three ways.² In Psalms³ there is a phrase that reads "issues of death," and as the numerical value of the Hebrew word "issues" is nine hundred and three it was assumed by the sages that there were nine hundred and three means by which one might meet death. Croup was regarded by them as the hardest of all deaths enumerated, for as they state, "It is like the violent extraction of a piece of thorn from the wool of skins." As the easiest death is regarded the "Divine Kiss" (of which Moses and others are said to have died), "for it is like the draining out of a hair from milk."

The Talmud attributes the death of many young women to the following three causes. Firstly, it is assumed that the woman who dies at an early age has neglected strict circumspection during the period of separation. Secondly, that she did not take the proper care with regard to "the cake of the first of dough."⁴ Thirdly, death

* Paper presented at the fifty-fifth meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, New York, December 29, 1919.

¹ R. H. 16b.

² Berachoth 8a. Comp. also Lecky, *Hist. of European Morals*, New York, 1890, Vol. I, p. 208. The Roman philosophers taught that death was a law of nature, not a punishment. The Church-fathers regarded it as a penal infliction introduced on account of the sin of Adam.

³ Ps. lxxviii. 21. R. H. 18b: "The death of the righteous is a calamity equal in magnitude to the burning of the house of our God" (the Temple).

⁴ Num. xv. 20.

is attributed to a failure to light the Sabbath lamps on Friday evening.⁵

The heaviest of penalties is the fate of the one who desecrates the name of God.⁶ The Rabbis have gone so far as to state that even repentance on the Day of Atonement and sufferings are only suspensive in warding off the penalty, which is death for such an offense. The pious orthodox Jew will even to-day under no circumstances pronounce the name of God in vain.

The Talmud states that one who insults or displeases a sage will be overtaken by death or destruction should the sage care to fix his eye upon him.⁷

The Talmud is most exact in the description of the angel of death conveying a man from this world to the world beyond. The exact phrasing is as follows:⁸ It is said of the angel of death that he has eyes all over, and when a man is on the point of dissolution he takes his position above the man's head with his sword stretched out with a drop of gall suspended on it.⁹ He is no sooner seen by the dying man than, seized with convulsions, he opens his mouth and a drop falls in. This is the immediate cause of death, his livid appearance and decomposition. The description tallies with the saying of Rabbi Chanena ben Cahana, that to prevent decomposition, turn the face downward. The Talmud also predicts certain good or bad omens for people dying in the following ways:¹⁰ Weeping is a bad omen; the face downward, also a bad omen; upward, a good omen; face toward the bystanders, a good omen; toward the wall, a bad omen; a livid appearance is a good omen; a glowing and ruddy appearance, a good omen. To die on the Sabbath eve, "the entrance into rest," is a good omen; at the close of the Sabbath, a good omen; and on the eve of the Day of Atonement (before any benefit can be derived from the atoning virtue of the day), a bad omen; at its close, a good omen. To die from derangement of the digestive organs is a good omen, for the majority of righteous men (owing probably to their sedentary habits as students of the Law) die of that complaint. On the other hand, the sages of the Talmud taught that if a man failed to follow the precepts of the Law upon this earth and suddenly died and was not mourned over and was not buried, or if rain fell upon his bier

⁵ Sabbath 31b. Comp. 1 Tim. ii. 15.

⁶ Yoma 86a.

⁷ Erubin 29a. Comp. Bartels, *Medizin der Naturvölker*, pp. 201-3.

⁸ Avodah Zorah 20b.

⁹ See Frazer's *Fear and Worship of the Dead*.

¹⁰ Kethuboth 103b.

or if an animal dragged his body about, then his friends and relatives might be well aware that the sins committed upon this earth were forgiven and that he had entered the abode of bliss.¹¹

Although the angel of death is able to overtake a man irrespective of his position, yet the Talmud assures us that a man who is engaged in the study of the Torah and the Talmud cannot be overtaken by this angel of death. Two examples might be quoted from the Talmud to exemplify the above statement. David had asked God to be informed as to his end and the measure of his days.¹² He was told that this was hidden from man by an unalterable decree. (Hezekiah formed an exception.) "Let me then know," he urged, "the day of my death."¹³ "That will take place on a Sabbath day," was the divine answer. "May it not," he begged, "be postponed to the following day?" "No, the reign of Solomon will begin on that Sabbath, and thine must not overlap it for a moment of time." "Let me then die," he entreated, "a day before, 'For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand.'" ¹⁴ "No, one day spent by thee in the study of the Law is better than a thousand burnt sacrifices which thy son will offer upon the altar." So David, to foil the angel of death, spent every Sabbath day in unremitting study of the Law, and when at last the angel of death presented himself he was kept in check, as David never for one moment interrupted his study. The angel then made an unusual noise in a tree at the back of his chamber, and David still continuing his study mounted a ladder to ascertain the cause. One of the steps giving way, he stopped for a moment to set it right. The opportunity was seized, David expired. Or, to quote a second example, the Rabbis relate that there was a family at Jerusalem whose members died at the age of eighteen years.¹⁵ Rabbi Yochanan ben Zachai conjectured that they were descendants from Eli, concerning whom it is said, "And all the increase of thine house shall die in the flower of their age," and he advised them as antidote to the curse to give themselves up to the study of the Law. They did so, and as a result, the Talmud tells us, their ages were prolonged.

The sages of the Talmud have enforced special rules of conduct which are to be observed in the presence of a dead body.¹⁶ The contents of one of these laws is as follows: "Nothing should

¹¹ Sanhedrin 47a.

¹² Comp. Ps. xxxix. 4.

¹³ Rosh Hashona 18b. Comp. also Bereshit R. xliv, § 2. Vayikra R. x.

¹⁴ Ps. lxxxiv. 10.

¹⁵ Sabbath 30a and b.

¹⁶ Berachoth 3b.

le said in presence of a dead body but what has reference to it." On the other hand, "while the dead body is in the house the mourners are exempt from reciting the Shema,¹⁷ from prayers, from wearing the phylacteries and from all commandments contained in the Law."¹⁸ Dead bodies, although apparently lifeless, are in accordance with Rabbi Abuhu's theory aware of all that is said in their presence until the lid is put upon the coffin.¹⁹ The sages have reported that even the dead are supposed to feel the sting of the worm²⁰ as the living do the prick of a needle, for it is said, "But his flesh upon him shall have pain."²¹ There is a prayer recited for the dead even to-day, with the petition, "And preserve him from the beating of the grave from worms and insects." The reason for the enforced silence in the presence of the dead is to avert the following situation as cited by the Rabbis. It is sometimes customary that the superfluous words exchanged between a man and his wife on certain occasions are repeated to him on his death-bed, or spoken of between the times of his death and his burial.²²

There are prescribed rules to be observed in Jewish burial ceremonies. These customs are the outcome of Rabbi Gamaliel's reforms²³ who, noticing costly funeral ceremonies and the consequent evil of the desecration of dead bodies by poor relatives, attempted to reduce funeral expenses. So he ordered that he himself should be buried in a linen shroud, and out of respect to him, all those who died after him were buried in a similar manner. Rabbi Papa, however, states that in his day bodies were generally buried in canvas valued at about a zouz.

On the death of a wise man (an official who ranks third to the President of the Sanhedrin)²⁴ the whole community must go into mourning, for, as the Talmud relates, "A failure to observe this custom will often cause the early death of the children of the community whose fathers have failed to observe this injunction." An-

¹⁷ Deut. vi. 4-9.

¹⁸ Berachoth 17b. Comp. also Maimonides, *Hilchoth Aveloth*, Sec. 4, *Halacha 7*.

¹⁹ Sabbath 152b. Comp. Plutarch, "Consol. ad uxor.," *Opera*, VIII, 411 (Reiske, 611).

²⁰ It is a common belief even nowadays that he who violates the graves will suffer terrible punishment. Comp. Prescott's *History of Ferdinand and Isabella*, Vol. I, p. xxix.

²¹ Job xiv. 22.

²² Chagigah 5b.

²³ Kethuboth 8b.

²⁴ Mo'ed Katon 25a.

other law cited by the Talmud compels one who meets a funeral procession to follow it, and a failure to do this is a reproach to our Maker, for, in the exact words of the Talmud, "whosoever mocketh the poor (in good work of which the dead are destitute) reproacheth the Maker."²⁵ While the Rabbis have taught that great respect ought to be paid to the dead, yet it is a precept of the Talmud that "a funeral procession should give way to a bridal procession."²⁶

The Rabbis have taught that "death and life are in the hand of the tongue,"²⁷ indicating thereby that "one may kill with the tongue as well as with the hand." As a result the Rabbis state that "loving kindness is above charity, as unlike the latter it is exerted personally as well as by alms, for the benefit of the rich as well as the poor, the dead as well as the living."²⁸ The Rabbis have taught that the greatest care should be taken²⁹ in order to carry out the wishes of the dead, for according to the Talmud "it takes twelve months for a person to be entirely forgotten by his survivors."³⁰ During that time, "the dead man's soul is supposed to ascend and descend," and should the dead man's wish not be carried out, his soul would be unable to find its proper rest.³¹

The Talmud gives rather a peculiar explanation of the words "slept" and "dead."³² Wherever the Bible uses the word "slept" of a person who has gone from this life, it means that he has left a son here who is worthy of carrying his name, while on the other hand, wherever the word "dead" is used it signifies that the descendants of the dead man were unworthy of using his name.³³

The Talmud in relating the story of Ezekiel and the manner in which he restored the dried bones, states that the men whom Ezekiel raised, sang, praised God and died again.³⁴ It was even claimed by Rabbi Yehudah ben Bethaira that he was a descendant of these resurrected people who left him a pair of phylacteries.³⁵

²⁵ Berachoth 18a. Comp. Prov. xvii. 5.

²⁶ Kethuboth 17a.

²⁷ Erechin 15b. Comp. Prov. xviii. 21.

²⁸ Succah 49b.

²⁹ Ta'anith 21z.

³⁰ Bernachoth 58b.

³¹ R. Hertz, "Représentation collective de la mort," in *Année sociologique*, X, 1905-6, p. 48.

³² 1 Kings xi. 21.

³³ Bava Bathra 116a.

³⁴ Sanhedrin 92b.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

It is customary for people when in sorrow to visit the cemeteries where they have some dear one buried. Rabbi Levi Bar Choma says³⁶ that the reason for this was that those who came to visit the graves of their departed ones were in the habit of asking their dead to intercede on their behalf before the throne of the almighty God, and in order to prove that the dead hear, the Talmud relates several stories to that effect.³⁷ By means of these stories it is proved that disembodied spirits converse with each other. For we read in Deut. xxiv. 5: "And the Lord said unto him (Moses), This is the land which I swore unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying—." The Talmud continues: "Saying what? The holy one, blessed be He, said unto Moses, Go after thy deceased and say to the patriarchs that the oath which I have sworn to them I have already fulfilled to their children."

On the other hand, the following story might well illustrate the above thought more explicitly.³⁸ A holy man was once annoyed by his wife for giving a denarius to a poor man on New Year's eve at a time of scarcity; and he went and spent the night in a cemetery. His attention was arrested by the voice of a spirit asking another to go on an excursion with her to the Veil (screening the holy of holies in the heavenly temple) in order to hear what calamities would be decreed against the world at that season of judgment. "I am buried in a mat," was the reply, "and I am ashamed to show myself in it. But go thou, sister, and tell me what thou hast heard." She did so and brought the information that the crops sown at the first rainy season would be destroyed by the hail. The holy man profited by it, and while all other crops were destroyed his were of the best quality. The next year, he again availed himself of the information imparted to the shabbily attired spirit and again secured an exceptionally good harvest. His wife wormed out the secret of his success and, in a quarrel with that spirit's mother, alluded derisively to that mat in which her daughter was buried. When the holy man presented himself on the next New Year's eve at the cemetery, the same conversation ensued: but the spirit answered, "Leave me alone, sister, for the living are fully informed of what passes between us."

Another Talmudic legend³⁹ tells us that Kaleb, before joining the commission sent by the great leader Moses to explore "the land

³⁶ Ta'anith 16a.

³⁷ Berachoth 18b.

³⁸ Comp. Gruneisen, *Der Ahnenkultus*, p. 166, so also Duhm, *Die bösen Geister im Alten Testament*, pp. 24-5.

³⁹ Sotah 34b.

of milk and honey," prayed at the graves of the patriarchs in Hebrew that God should keep him steadfast.

In another instance⁴⁰ we are told that when the Holy Temple was to be destroyed, Jeremiah went to the Jordan to conjure up Moses, also to the cave of Machpelah to arouse the patriarchs that they should intercede on behalf of their descendants with God. This story forms the basis of one of the best-known dirges in the service for the Ninth of Ab.

This custom of invoking the aid of the dead is also mentioned in later Rabbinic literature.⁴¹ The sages report the practice of even holding penitential services in the cemeteries in times of danger. The reason for this practice might be twofold. One, to remind the people of their frailty and as a result to make them humble and worthy of God's grace; and secondly, to bring back forcibly to them the great virtues of their ancestors, more especially, the greatest of all religious devotions, the sacrifice of Isaac who will intercede in their behalf in Heaven. It was doubtless customary, as can be learned from various ancient sources, for individuals to pray at the graves of parents or grandparents before one undertook an important mission or when one was in serious troubles.

The Zohar,⁴² the mystic work of the thirteenth century, well recommends the visit to the graves of the pious in all troublesome times and especially the holding of solemn services on the cemetery, with a procession led by some one holding a Sefer Torah, a custom which even the great Ezekiel Landau recommended.⁴³

While it is customary that in all cases the appeal for assistance from the dead should be made to some departed relation, yet we find more often the custom of appealing to people who had the reputation of a saintly life or to some renowned rabbi or leader in Israel.⁴⁴

This custom, however, of pilgrimages to the graves of saints is more in vogue among Oriental Jews. The most popular of these pilgrimages is the annual visit on the eighteenth of Iyar (Lag be Omer) to the supposed grave of Simon be Yohai near Tiberias, to which people flock not only from Palestine and adjacent countries but even from Arabia, Persia and Bohkara. Many are the local saints whose names only are known but who are nevertheless

⁴⁰ Echali, Pesikta Rabbathi, Sec. 24.

⁴¹ Ta'anith 16a.

⁴² Zohar Lev., pp. 70b and 71a.

⁴³ Noda be Yehudah, Orach Hayyim, 109.

⁴⁴ *Revue des études juives*, LI, 268, and LII, 80.

worshiped in Demanhur, Egypt, in Nazzan and Tetuan, Morocco, in Zolkiew, Galicia, and other places too numerous to mention. In the last-named city it was only known that the saint's name was Moses ben Shackna and that he died October 25, 1662.⁴⁵

As such graves may also be regarded that of Ezekiel, south of Hillah, the ancient Sura, the tomb of Daniel near Mosul, not far from El Kush where the grave of Nahum is shown, and also the grave of the high priest Joshua ben Jehozadak near Bagdad. The Jews of Persia have as their special saint Serah, the daughter of Asher, the only female mentioned in Jacob's family when he went to Egypt (inasmuch as Jacob's daughter Dinah was doubtless not eligible), and visit her grave near Ispahan in all troubles.

The grave of Moses Isserls' teacher, Rabbi Shackna of Lublin, is perhaps one of the best historically known. On Rabbi Shackna's grave solemn penitential services were held to the cholera on Adar 29 which chanced to be Yom Kippur Katon, 1915. The grave of Shackna's pupil Moses Isserls in Cracow is not the goal of regular pilgrimage, but numerous individuals visit his grave and deposit their written requests inside the railing which surrounds the grave.

In direct imitation of the Mohammedans, the Oriental Jews have numerous graves of prophets and other well-known Biblical personages which are the goal of annual pilgrimages, just as the Arabs make their pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina or perhaps to the grave of some Marabout.

One finds that the custom of taking a vow to visit the graves was already an established custom in the eighth century. While Saerkes⁴⁶ is somewhat doubtful as to whether one ought to perform such duties, he does not oppose the practice of it, inasmuch as it had already become an accepted practice, and whatever, he writes, has become an accepted practice must not be nullified. A number of later Talmudic authorities are of a similar opinion. One therefore finds in accordance with an early medieval practice that the graves are visited⁴⁷ on the Ninth of Ab, which is the day on which both the first and second Temples were destroyed, on the eve of Rosh ha Shannah and the Day of Atonement. The reason for the visits on these days is that the Ninth of Ab is to inspire the visitor with sadness, while the visits on New Year's eve and the Day of Atonement are explained to be occasions on which the departed are asked

⁴⁵ Comp. Ha-Eshkol, Iv: 159.

⁴⁶ *Notes on Yorch De'ah*, 217.

⁴⁷ Shulhan Aruk, Orach Hayyim, 599, 581, 605.

to intercede with the Almighty when mortal man is being weighed in the balance.

Professor Deutsch has pointed out on a former occasion a curious specimen of appealing to the departed in individual needs by one Samuel Haida of Prague (d. 1685). Haida was preparing an edition of an old book, the *Tanna debe Eliyahu*, which, owing to the negligence of the copyists, had a very corrupt text. Instead of looking for older manuscripts, Haida fasted, prayed to the Prophet Elijah whom he believed to be the author of this medieval work, and visited the graves of the righteous, so numerous in Prague, asking for their assistance. He sincerely believed that his prayer was answered and that the pious ancestors interceded for him with the prophet Elijah, who revealed to him in a dream the explanation of the difficult passage.

Another custom one finds in connection with the dead is that of what is known as a "prayer of forgiveness" addressed to persons whom the worshiper is believed to have wronged during his life. It is related that the famous *Land-Rabbiner* of Moravia, Mendel Krachmal, once advised a peddler who was terribly conscience-stricken believing to have caused the death of his assistant in a blizzard, to take three learned and pious Israelites with him to the grave of the supposed victim and beg and ask his forgiveness in their presence.⁴⁸ And even as late as the latter part of the eighteenth century the Rabbinate of Rawitsch in Posnania condemned a man who had spoken ill of a dead neighbor to apologize at the grave.⁴⁹

Professor Deutsch has called attention to another phase of this subject, namely that the belief in the power of the dead to avert misfortune, and especially premature death, from the living, "is underlying the ceremony to dedicate a cemetery by killing a rooster (*kapparah*) over the first grave." This custom, writes Professor Deutsch, as far as he is aware, was first mentioned by the Cabbalist Aaron Berechiah da Modena, the uncle of the free-thinker Leo Modena, in his *Na'abar Yabbok*, which, with many alterations, is still very popular as a prayer-book used at death-beds and cemeteries.⁵⁰ The custom was practised in 1856 by Rabbi Illoway at the dedication of a new cemetery in Syracuse, New York.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Zemach Zedek, N. 93.

⁴⁹ Cohen, *Geschichte der Juden in Rom*, p. 36.

⁵⁰ Edition Mantua, 1726, p. 47b.

⁵¹ Comp. *Sinai*, II, 773; so also in Casale Monfiesato, Feb., 1870.