

Measuring Graves and Laying Wicks:
Women's Rituals Connecting the Living and the Dead
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As we live through this time of pandemic, we are confronted daily by news of death, whether of those unknown to us, or of our close friends and relatives. This set me to thinking about how our relations with the dead, and reminded me of a women's folk ritual that expresses powerful bonds between the dead and the living. Although this ritual and the Yiddish texts that accompany it are primarily associated with the High Holidays, I chose to teach them for Shavuot because they can speak to our present condition.

The two eighteenth-century texts translated below are rooted in a centuries-old Ashkenazic women's ritual known as kvorim mesn קברים מעסן (measuring graves) and kneytlakh legn קנייטלעך לייגן (laying wicks). In times of illness or trouble, and during the High Holiday season, women walked in a circle around the circumference of the cemetery and measured the cemetery or individual graves with candlewick, all the while reciting tkhines תחינות, prayers in Yiddish. Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and often on the Eve of Yom Kippur, they made the wicks into candles "for the living" and "for the dead" members of their families, again, reciting supplications as they did so. The candle wick would be cut into lengths, one piece for each family member, living or dead, and the wicks would be rubbed with wax, while petitions concerning that family member were recited. The litany of dead family members often went back to Adam and Eve, or Abraham and Sarah, and continued on to recently departed relatives only after a listing of important patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel. The wicks were then twisted into two heavy candles, to burn either at home or in the synagogue, according to local custom. There are hints of this ritual complex going back nearly a thousand years, and it is well attested in literary and ethnographic material over the last three centuries.

While these two texts are both in Yiddish, and both intended to be recited by women performing the same ritual, they express very different attitudes towards the relations between the living and the dead. Some questions to consider as you read:

What do the living expect or hope for from the dead?

How do the dead benefit from the actions of the living?

Does the ritual of measuring graves and laying wicks establish a reciprocity between the living and the dead? How?

Do the dead seem "alive" (or "present") in either or both of these texts?

To many of us, this way of thinking about the dead and our relations with them may seem alien. Nonetheless, what in these texts can speak to us? What claims do we have on the dead? What claims do they have on us?

From Sefer ha-Hayyim [The Book of Life], a guide for dealing with the sick, the dying, and the dead compiled by Simeon ben Israel Judah Frankfurt, first published in Amsterdam, 1703. The women who measure the graves should say this prayer. However, first she should say [some Hebrew prayers]. Then she should say this:

I pray you, O Lord my God I pray you, my dear God, accept my prayer that I pray before you in this holy place [i.e. the cemetery] where lie the pious who sleep in the earth. We are come here for the sake of Your glory, and for the sake of the pious souls who are in the light of paradise, and whose bodies rest in the earth, to measure the cemetery and all the graves, so that all may have a part in the candles that we shall bring into the holy synagogue, to honor You

with, and that the lamp may bring atonement for the souls, who are called "**the human soul is the lamp of the Lord**" [Prov. 20:27]. And when we say our prayers in synagogue by the light of these candles, may you accept and receive our plea to forgive all our sins. And may you enlighten us with the light of your Shekhinah [Divine Presence]. And may the light be an atonement for the sin of Eve, who extinguished Adam's light, and brought death to the world. O dear God, may you deliver us and enlighten us with the light from your holy candelabrum in the Temple, and make all the dead live, and do away with death unto eternity, just as you have spoken. Amen, Selah.

And they should begin to measure from the right side, and should measure all the graves with the wick, except for the grave of someone who did not do right during his life. And they should make wax candles from it in the synagogue. And when they have measured, they should say [some additional Hebrew prayers].

Excerpts from The Tkhine Of **Three Gates** (ca. 1750)

This tkhine was made by the virtuous woman, Mistress Sarah, may she live long, daughter of our teacher the rabbi Jacob, of blessed memory, grandchild of the rabbi, our teacher Mordecai, of blessed memory, who was head of the rabbinical court in the holy community of Brisk, may God protect it.

I, Sarah bas Tovim, I do this for the sake of the dear God, blessed be he, and blessed be his name, and arrange, this second time, yet another beautiful new tkhine...

This tkhine one should say before making candles on the Eve of the Day of Atonement.

Lord of the World, I pray you, most merciful God, may you accept my observance of the commandment of the lights that we make for the sake of your holy Name, and for the sake of the holy souls....

May it be Your will; May it be Your will that today, on the Eve of the Day of Atonement, we be remembered before you by performance of the commandment of the lights that we will make in the synagogue. May we be remembered for good, and may we be worthy to give lights to the Temple, as it was of old...

[Wicks are laid for Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel, Moses, Aaron, David and Solomon. One example:]

By the merit of my laying the thread for our Mother Sarah, may God, blessed be he, remember for us the merit of her pain when her dear son Isaac was led away to be bound on the altar [cf. Genesis 22]. May she be an advocate for us before God, may he be blessed, that this year we not, God forbid, become widows, and that our little children may not, God forbid, be taken away from the world during our lives...

By the merit of all the righteous and pious people who have ever lived, from the time of Adam until our own day--may their merit defend us on the Day of Judgment so that we will be sealed for good. May our lights, and our husbands' lights, and our children's lights, not be extinguished before their time, God forbid. By the merit of the holy Fathers and Mothers, by the merit of the little children who say, "**Amen, may his great Name be blessed forever and ever**"--may their merit defend us so that the Resurrection of the Dead will come speedily and soon, that they may rejoice **in the time to come**.

May it be your will May it be your will that today, on the Eve of Yom Kippur, we may be remembered for good as we bring the candles into the synagogue, for this commandment that we perform. May we be worthy to bring candles to the Temple as it was of old. And may the prayers said by these lights be with great devotion and great awe, so that Satan will be unable to

hinder our prayer. May these lights, which were made for the holy and pure souls, awaken them so that they arise and rouse one another back to the holy Fathers and Mothers, and further back to Adam and Eve, that they repair the sin by which they brought death to the whole world. For they caused death to enter the world, so it is fitting for them to plead for us that we may be free of the Angel of Death. May they arise from their graves and pray for us, that this year, may it come for good, there may finally be the Resurrection of the Dead. May the Attribute of Justice become the Attribute of Mercy; may they be unified. May they pray for us that the Resurrection of the Dead may be fulfilled. And may all the holy and pure angels pray that the dry bones live again speedily and soon [cf. Ezekiel 37:1-14].

Lord of the world, I pray you, merciful God, that you may accept the lights that we make for the holy pure souls. For each thread that we lay, may you increase life for us. May the holy souls awake out of their graves and pray for us that we may be healthy. It is appropriate for us to pray for the dead, for those who died in our own generations, and for those who have died from the time of Adam and Eve on. Today we make candles for the sake of all the souls--for the sake of the souls that lie in the fields and the forests, and for all the martyrs, and for all those who have no children, and for all the little children. May they awake, may the dry bones live, speedily and soon. May we be worthy to see the Resurrection of the Dead this year, Amen, Selah.