

## A Pious Man and Two Spirits: A Talmudic Ghost Story From Jewish and Japanese Perspectives

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### Introduction

In the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate *Berakhot* 18b) we find an interesting tale, which may be called a kind of "ghost story":

It is related that a certain pious man gave a *denar* [coin] to a poor man on the eve of New Year in a year of drought. , and his wife scolded him, and he went and passed the night in the cemetery, and where he heard two spirits conversing with one another. Said one to her companion: My dear, come and let us wander about the world and let us hear from behind the curtain what suffering is coming on the world. Said her companion to her: I am not able, because I am buried in a matting of reeds. But do you, do go, and whatever you hear tell me. So the other went and wandered about and returned. Said her companion to her: My dear, what have you heard from behind the curtain? She replied: I heard that whoever sows after the first rainfall will have his crop smitten by hail. So the man went and did not sow till after the second rainfall, with the result that everyone else's crop was smitten and his was not smitten. The next year he again went and passed the night in the cemetery, and heard the two spirits conversing with one another. Said one to her companion: Come and let us wander about the world and hear from behind the curtain what punishment is coming upon the world. Said the other to her: My dear, did I not tell you that I am not able because I am buried in a matting of reeds? But do you do go, and whatever you hear, come and tell me. So the other one went and wandered about the world and returned. She said to her: My dear, what have you heard from behind the curtain? She replied: I heard that whoever sows after the later rain will have his crop smitten with blight. So the man went and sowed after the first rain

with the result that everyone else's crop was blighted and his was not blighted. Said his wife to him: How is it that last year everyone else's crop was smitten and yours was not smitten, and this year everyone else's crop is blighted and yours is not blighted? So he related to her all his experiences.

The story goes that shortly afterwards a quarrel broke out between the wife of that pious man and the mother of the child, and the former said to the latter, Come and I will show you your daughter buried in a matting of reeds. The next year the man again went and spent the night in the cemetery and heard those conversing together. One said: My dear, come and let us wander about the world and hear from behind the curtain what suffering is coming upon the world. Said the other: My dear, leave me alone; our conversation has already been heard among the living.

This story has been included also in a famous medieval anthology of the Talmudic stories, *Ein Yaaqov* (published in Salonika, 1516). The author, Jacob ben Solomon Ibn Habib (ca. 1445 to 1515/6), aimed to create a collection of the tales and lores in the Talmud, including various commentaries by great previous scholars, and including his own interpretations.

#### Purpose

In the present article, the tale in the Tractate *Berakhot* is taken as an example to see how the above-mentioned "ghost story" was received and interpreted by one of the medieval Jewish scholars, namely Jacob ben Solomon Ibn Habib. To grasp the story through his eyes will have at least three merits:

1) For our acknowledgement of the medieval perspective on the soul of the deceased after the death.

2) For our recognition of the problems involved in the understanding of the ancient (Talmudic) story, which had already troubled the medieval readers.

3) For discovering our own problems in understanding this story.

This paper thus aims to confirm these merits, through the analysis of the Talmudic "ghost story" as a case-study.

And lastly, it presents some folkloristic elements, which interest me as one who belongs to the Japanese culture.

### **The Context of the Talmudic Discourse**

The story is presented as follows:

1) On the eve of New Year in a year of drought, a pious man gives a coin to a poor man. The pious man's wife scolds him.

2) He goes out of his home and spends the night in the cemetery.

3) He hears the spirits of two dead girls conversing. One says, "My dear, let us wander about the world and let us hear from behind the curtain what suffering is coming on the world." The other says, "I cannot, for I am buried in a matting of reeds." When the former spirit wanders and returns, the latter pesters to tell what she has heard. The former replies, "I have heard that whoever sows after the first rainfall will have his crop smitten by hail".

4) The man sows after the second rainfall. Everyone else's crop is smitten but his.

5) The next year, he again spends the night in the cemetery, and hears the same two spirits conversing. The same conversation as last year is repeated. One wanders and returns. And she tells the other, "Whoever sows after the later rain will have his crop smitten with blight."

6) The man sows after the first rain. So everyone else's crop is blighted but his is not blighted.

7) His wife asks him the reason of his success. So he tells her all his experiences.

8) Shortly afterwards, she has a quarrel with the mother of that deceased girl buried in a matting of reeds. The pious man's wife ridicules the girl's mother for her daughter's matting.

9) The next year, the pious man again spends the night in the cemetery and hears the conversation of the two spirits as last year. One invites the other to wander. But the spirit of that girl says, "Leave me alone; our conversation has already been heard among the living."

The story is told, in fact, in the course of a discussion on the question whether the dead are aware of what happens on earth, as an evidence that they are so indeed cognizant. In this case, the dead girl in the tomb knows of the living's ridicule of her miserable matting. The conclusion is thus: אלמאידעי———"therefore the dead know the earthly happenings."

But in the course of the discussion, a question is raised about the validity of the tale as evidence: דילמא איניש שכיבו אזילו אמר להו:———"is not it possible that

some other deceased person (who know the fact that the girl was buried in a matting of reeds, and that her mother quarreled with a certain woman about the matter) went to tell that to the two spirits?" (If so, the dead girl does not necessarily know the earthly happenings!).

It should be noted here that the questioner has doubted the tale merely because of the validity as the ground for its argument. There is no question about the reality of the tale as a fact, except the cause of concern of the dead for the earthly world. The dead in the tomb are conscious. Their spirits go in and out of their bodies to wander about in the outside world. They can fly so high that they are informed about the heavenly affairs (if not the earthly matter). They talk to each other, and their voices are audible to the human ear. Thus the Talmudic story.

#### An Example of The Story's Reception in the Medieval Age

The medieval Jewish people, however, seem to have already been doubtful of the reality of the Talmudic tale itself. As mentioned above, the story of a pious man and two spirits is printed also in the aggadic anthology, *Ein Yaaqov*. The author, Jacob Ibn Habib, says in his own commentary on the tale concerned that such strange things are almost incredible. And he raises some questions about the tale as follows:

- 1) Why would "a pious man" quarrel with his wife?
- 2) Why would "a pious man" go to sleep in such an impure place as a cemetery on the eve of New Year, at a time when which one is required to purify oneself?
- 3) Why could he hear the voice of the dead?
- 4) Why did "a pious man" dare to intentionally repeat such a disgusting deed that looks like necromancy, which is forbidden in the Jewish religious law?

The author of the *Ein Yaaqov* wanted to present to his readers Talmudic tales as examples for the ideal life. For him (or them), however, the tale had two major problems.

First, the tale apparently has no ethical value: To be "pious", one should be peaceful with one's wife, and fulfill the religious commandments (which contradicts what the story tells about "a pious person").

Second, the tale seems to be irrational: It is impossible to hear the voice of the dead on earth, because, according to Ibn Habib, the spirit of the dead leaves the body and goes into Paradise. In the tomb there are only dry bones.

Thus this claim reflects the reality of death for the Medieval Jewish people. Therefore Ibn Habib was required to explain the tale instructively and rationally as follows:

1) On the eve of New Year in a year of drought, a pious man gave a coin to a poor man. The pious man himself was poor too. His wife scolded him, for he spent what little money he had.

2) He thought that he would rather die than live and went to bed, praying God for salvation. His desire to die influenced on his dream at night. So he dreamed that he went to the cemetery.——

3) ——In the dream he heard the spirits of two dead women conversing, for the quarrel with his wife influenced his thought. The hope that God may save him was, in his dream, imagined as the judgment of the celestial Court: "Whoever sows after the first rainfall will have his crop smitten by hail."

4) So he sowed after the second rainfall and succeeded.

5) The next year, he repeated the same act as last year.

6) And again he succeeded.

7) He told his wife the reason of his success.

8) The wife had a quarrel with the mother of that deceased girl and ridiculed her.

9) The next year, the pious man tried to repeat the same act as last year, but the spirits ceased to talk——, then he woke from his sleep. Namely, the whole story was nothing but a dream in that New Year's eve! Afterwards, the pious man sowed, as heard in the dream, and succeeded for two years. He reported all his experience to the Sages. They recorded the whole story as a good example for the virtue and merit of the alms that brought him the good fortune, and as a lesson for the women that they should be on in good terms with their husbands and with neighbors.

Ibn Habib interpreted the story in this way. His aim was to justify the hero's protagonist's action that seems to be immoral, and to find some useful lesson in an apparently nonsensical story.

But, if so, how does the tale contribute to the question of whether the dead are aware of the earthly happenings? Ibn Habib's answer is very simple: The dead are aware, for the story tells us so. If there was not any reality to the tale (even though the latter part of it was actually a "dream," as Ibn Habib

explains), the Talmudic sages would not adopt it as an evidence for their discourse. Setting aside the question of the propriety of Jacob Ibn Habib's "Freudian" interpretation, he provides some important and interesting points of view for our own consideration. Through his commentary, three characteristics of the tale appear. :

First, it is hard to find any clear ethical message in the story.

Second, it is difficult to take the story as an actual occurrence, especially because of its sequence of same events in threefold repetition.

And, third, it seems that the tale had some reality, despite its apparent strangeness, at least for the people of the Talmudic age.

When Ibn Habib strived to make the strange tale out into a "true story" or a "good example," he recognized these problems and solved them in his own way.

We Modern students of the literature may argue that these characteristics of the tale concerned are surely strange as the details of an actual occurrence, but as elements of a folk tale they are very natural and basic. I do not dare to employ here the standard theories proposed by the famous scholars like such as Antti Aarne (1867-1925), Stith Thompson (1885-1976, America), Vladimir Propp (1895-1970, Soviet), Max Lüthi (1909-1991), Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917-1992, France), and so on, only to reconfirm their proprieties through the story. Rather, I attempt to present some folkloristic elements, which interest me as one who belongs to Japanese culture, to raise new questions about our understanding of the tale concerned.

Japanese Folklorists: Yanagita and Origuchi

When I first read first this "ghost story" in the Talmud, I remembered recalled two Japanese folkloristic concepts. One is *Sorei* (which means "spirit of one's ancestor") proposed by YANAGITA Kunio (1875-1962), and the other is *Marebito* (which means "uncommon one" or "stranger") proposed by ORIKUCHI Shinobu (1887-1953).

Term: *Sorei* and *Marebito*

Yanagita pointed out that *Sorei* or the ancestral spirits have played an important part role in the fertility rites in the traditional Japanese agricultural society. They return from the world of the dead to this world twice a year: in winter to bless the New Year, and in summer to promise the a prosperous harvest of the year.

Thus Accordingly, YOSHIDA Kenkō (1283?–1350?) reports in his work diary *Tsurezuregusa* ("Essays in Idleness") on the performance of the service to the ancestral spirits on the New Year's Eve:

On the last night of the year, when it is very dark, with blazing pine torches people run about till past midnight knocking at the doors. What can it be for? With loud cries their restless feet are ever on the move; but yet when the day breaks there is not a sound. How touching is the year's farewell! The Feast of the Dead, the night when the dead return, is kept no longer in the Capital, though in the Eastern Provinces it is still observed.

In such a service, or with ritual drama, masked youth performed the ancestral spirits returning from their world were performed by the masked youth (as known from the other ancient documents or modern local customs in Japan). And Consequently Orikuchi, who was Yanagita's student, boldly hypothesized that: iIn the narrow and, closed world of the ancient agricultural society, the strangers outside who happened to pass outside the village also would also be the object of awe, and sometimes even identified with the ancestral spirits or any deities. Origkuchi's so- called "Marebito" is such a deified stranger.

#### A Guest on the New Year's Eve

Based on the studies by Yanagita and Origkuchi, Japanese folklorists hypothetically assume that the respect for the dead and the awe of strangers might be cause to shaped a typical motif in Japanese folktales known as "A Guest on The New Year's Eve." The tale has the plot as follows:

- 1) On the New Year's Eve, an honest but poor man is visited by a stranger, who begs for food and a night's lodging.
- 2) The honest man receives the stranger hospitably.
- 3) The next morning, the stranger is dying in the bed.
- 4) The honest man covers the body of the dead.
- 5) When the honest man would bury the dead, he finds the golden coins instead of the body.

One should not overlook the common factors between this plot and the story told in the Talmud cannot be overlooked. Namely: New Year's Eve, a

good man's kindness to a beggar, and the dead bringing wealth. But there are some wide differences: In the case of *Berakhot* 18b, the pious man is not visited by a beggar. The wealth is not brought by the beggar but by the other different dead figures (the girls).

#### Return the Gift of an Alien Being

Here I remember recall another typical Japanese folktale motif known as "Return the Gift of an Alien Being." The tale's has the plot is as follows:

- 1) On the way home, an honest man rescues a trapped animal.
- 2) He is visited by the animal who had taken the form of the human.
- 3) He becomes rich by the animal's supernatural work.
- 4) His wife torments the animal.
- 5) The animal runs away.

The whole plot clearly resembles the case of *Berakhot* 18b: A man acquires the wealth by an alien being to whom he did a favor, but his wife's behavior leads to the loss of the gift. But in the case of *Berakhot* 18b, however, there is no direct connection between the good deed of the pious man and the dead girls who brought him the wealth.

#### Discussion

In short, the story told in *Berakhot* 18b is a mixture of "A Guest on The New Year's Eve" and "Return the Gift of an Alien Being.": A man cherishes gives charity to a poor visitor in on the New Year's Eve, and he becomes rich by the a supernatural power of an alien being. It seems curious, however, for, at least from the Japanese folkloristic perspective, that the structure of the tale is split between a combination of the first half of one tale and the last half of another.

Such a structure cannot be found in other Japanese folktales or legends

What the phenomenon means? I cannot find any reasonable explanation yet, but it would be worth to point out this interesting fact., and it is difficult to suggest an alternative explanation at this stage of my research.

#### (Additional Explanation)

Of course, we must be careful to apply the concepts of "Sorei" and "Marebito" to the Talmudic narrative, for Yanagita and Orikuchi constructed their theories on the assumption that such stories (as the appearance of the dead spirits or the visit of the strangers in the New Year's eve) was originally

told in the ancient, small and closed society. But, the Talmudic story of "the pious man and two spirits" (at least in the current form of it) seems to be told in the relatively recent age, for the pious man gives a denar (that is, a Roman coin) to the poor man. The Jewish homeland was controlled by the Roman Empire only after B.C.E. 63. It is hard to imagine that the society, in which the foreign currency circulates, was so ancient and closed. Moreover, this Talmudic story is told in Hebrew, which had been used as a kind of "literary language" (against Aramaic as "popular language") already before the Common Era. Why has such a "folkloristic" story as this been conveyed in Hebrew? I cannot find any answer yet.