

Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 18:

1. **Can an *onein* do mitzvot?** An *onein* (a mourner in the period before burial) is exempt from Shema, tefillah, tefillin, and all time-bound positive mitzvot. People who are waiting to carry a coffin are also exempt from Shema and tefillah, but those who already carried the coffin are not exempt from Shema. According to Rashi, though a *onein* is exempt from brachot and *bircat hamazon* he can say them if he chooses to. Tosfot, citing Yerushalmi, says an *onein* should not recite them. For one thing, it is considered disrespectful to the dead person. In addition, it is the responsibility of the mourners to make funeral arrangements on behalf of the deceased, and it is therefore not appropriate for the mourners to busy themselves with mitzvot rather than with these arrangements.
2. **Rabbeinu Tam ate and drank.** The sister of Rabbeinu Tam passed away on a Shabbat, and he found out after Shabbat. That same night, he ate meat and drank wine, which an *onein* is normally forbidden to do. When asked why, he explained that his sister had been married, and therefore it was her husband who carried the responsibility of making funeral arrangements. Since taking care of the deceased was not Rabbeinu Tam's responsibility, he did not need to follow the normal restrictions of the *onein* period. Tosfot mentions that Rabbeinu Tam's sister had lived in another town, and that may or may not have played a role in his decision not to act as an *onein*.
3. **One is exempt from mitzvot when in the same room as a dead body.** Rav Ashi explains that this is not about physical proximity, but about responsibility. If you are the one responsible for taking care of the burial, it is as if the body is right in front of you, and you are exempt from other obligations. What does that mean in practical terms today, when we have a chevra kadisha and funeral homes that will take care of all the details? Does it mean you can just hand over the arrangements to the professionals and you are no longer an *onein*? From the story of Rabbeinu Tam, that would seem to be the case. However, even with a funeral home making the arrangements, there is generally still a lot that a mourner needs to do. There are decisions to make and eulogies to write. Consultations with a rabbi are usually necessary. So even after you've handed things to the professionals, your part isn't really over. If there really is nothing left on your plate in terms of taking care of the deceased, would you then be permitted, or even required, to do positive time-bound mitzvot? The answer hinges on the reason that the *onein* is not obligated in these mitzvot. Is it because he is *osek bemitzvah*, preoccupied with the funeral arrangements? In that case, perhaps if he is not preoccupied then he would be obligated in other time-bound positive mitzvot. Or is it an issue of the mourner's mental state? The comforting process cannot really begin until after the burial, no matter who is making the arrangements, and perhaps the *onein*'s grief and shock are simply too raw for him to be obligated in other time-bound positive mitzvot.
4. **What not to do in a cemetery.** A shomer, someone who is watching a body, doesn't wear a tallit or tefillin or say Shema. The fact that the gemara refers specifically to a shomer suggests that someone who is simply walking in a cemetery can do these things. But we know this is not the case, because we learn in a *beraita* that you shouldn't walk in a cemetery with tefillin on your head and a Sefer Torah in your arm. It would be an insult to the people buried there, because it reminds them that it's too late for them, and they can no longer do mitzvot. So if anybody who goes to a cemetery is not supposed to wear a tallit or tefillin, why does the gemara specifically mention a shomer? Because the law is different for a shomer: in most cases as long as you are more than four amos away from the grave, you can wear a tallit and tefillin, but a shomer cannot, no matter how far he is from the body. The gemara relates a story about one rabbi reprimanding another for letting his tzitzit drag on the gravestones, saying he was causing

offense to the deceased who no longer had the ability to perform the mitzvah of tzitzit. The Shulchan Aruch says that in those times, the tallit was worn as a regular garment, unlike now when we wear tzitzit only for the specific purpose of fulfilling the mitzvah. So back then, the prohibition was only against allowing the tzitzit to drag on the graves, but today we have a stricter standard that the tzitzit should not even be seen. The custom today is to tuck in the tzitzit before entering the burial site.

5. **Do the dead really understand?** Two rabbis were walking in a cemetery, and one rabbi let his tzitzit drag on the ground by a tombstone. The other rabbi chastised him, saying the dead would talk about them negatively. The first rabbi said the dead have no idea what's going on. There's even a passuk that says the dead don't know anything. But the second rabbi said to him, "If you read it, you didn't review it. If you reviewed it, you didn't read it a third time. If you read it a third time, you didn't get the correct understanding." Because this passuk is not about the dead at all, but about the "living dead." There are people who live every day with the understanding that death will come, and who try to act accordingly. These people will in a way live forever. But those who don't are in a sense dead even while they are alive. These are the people that the verse is discussing, according to the second rabbi. What did he mean about reviewing the verse four times? To really understand something in the Torah, you need to first read the verse. Then you need to learn the Mishna on the verse, and then the gemara. But even once you have done that, you might still not understand. You have to keep studying and reviewing until you understand the real meaning of what you are learning, or there is no point to your learning at all.
6. **Dead people who are alive and living people who are dead.** A tzaddik lives after death, and a rasha is dead even while he lives. There's a continuum from this world to the next. As we learned on the previous page, we create a spiritual reality in this world that becomes what we experience in the next world. If we are living correctly in this world, we will never really die, but if we are not creating that spiritual reality, it is as if we never live at all. As told by Heshy Shenker: There are three names we give to cemeteries. *Beis hakevaros* (place of burial), *beis hachaim* (house of life), and *beis olamim* (eternal house). What is the difference? When a person simply lives their life, mostly in the physical world, for this person the cemetery is a *beis hakevaros*. It's just the place where they're buried; there is nothing about them that continues on after they die. When a person lives a righteous life and leaves behind righteous generations to follow in their footsteps, that person is buried in a *beis hachaim*. Though they are no longer physically in this world, their life continues through the generations that follow them. And for a person who truly inspired students, who go on to emulate them, the cemetery is a *beis olamim*. This person has the highest distinction of being buried in a house of eternity.
7. **The chassid who learned from the dead.** A chassid once angered his wife just before Rosh Hashana, and he left the house and spent the night in a cemetery. While there he heard the spirits of two young women talking to each other. The first said to her friend, "Let's fly around and we'll hear from the other side of the curtain, what bad decrees will be decreed on the world." Her friend said, "I can't, because I'm buried in a reed mat. You go ahead, and tell me what you hear." So the first young woman went, and when she returned her friend asked her what she'd heard. She said she'd heard a decree that would cause crops to be destroyed. The chassid who was overhearing this conversation then had information that no one else had, and was able to plant his crops in a way that they would not be harmed by the decree. After that, he went back to the cemetery every year and listened to the spirits talking about planting in the coming year. He was thus able to plant successfully while everyone around him saw their crops destroyed. Eventually his wife asked him how he was doing it, and he told her. Then his wife got into a fight with her neighbor, who was the mother of one of the spirits, and during the fight his

wife yelled at this woman about burying her daughter in a reed mat. The next time the chassid went to the cemetery, he heard one of the spirits tell the other that they had to stop talking about these things, because people were listening. This is truly a crazy story, but it suggests that dead people really do, at least to some extent, know what's going on in the world. However, the gemara does not accept the story as conclusive proof – perhaps the spirits received their information from other newly-dead people. Why would being buried in a reed mat have prevented the friend's spirit from going behind the curtain? The Tzlach, based on the Zohar, explains that as long as a body has not yet decomposed, the soul is not able to free itself and go into the higher realms. The reed mat slowed down the body's decomposition, so the soul could not go where it pleased. This might be part of the reason that our tradition is to bury people in simple shrouds. To understand this Zohar, we must understand that the body is the garment of the soul. The soul is attached to the body's experiences, not just physically but through its associations and its memories. Until the body decomposes, the soul isn't really in its spiritual element because it still has this attachment and these associations. Or perhaps a better way of understanding this is that a person might have done certain things during their life that make it more difficult for the soul to access the higher levels of Gan Eden.

8. **Asking questions of the dead.** Zeiri used to leave money with a hostess for safekeeping. One day he went somewhere, and when he came back the hostess had passed away. He followed her to the courtyard of death and asked her where his money was, and she told him. How could Zeiri do this? Isn't there a prohibition in the Torah against inquiring from the dead? The simple answer is that the prohibition is only against using magic to conjure the dead. There's nothing wrong with going directly to talk to them.
9. **Our actions have consequences in the next world.** Shmuel's father was guarding money for orphans, but he passed away and Shmuel didn't know where the money was. When Shmuel couldn't produce the money, people started to suspect that he had stolen it. So he went to the next world to find his father. On his way in, he saw Levi sitting outside, and he asked Levi why he wasn't allowed inside. Levi explained that when he was alive, he had been considered for a Rosh Yeshiva position but hadn't been chosen. He had felt slighted and after that would not even go into the yeshiva. That caused the rabbi who was chosen for the position to feel hurt and disrespected. As punishment for hurting this rabbi's feelings, Levi was not allowed into the yeshiva in the next world. When Shmuel got the information about the missing money from his father, he told them they had to let Levi in. Sometimes we need a tzaddik to advocate for us.
10. **Shmuel's father knew he would die soon.** When Shmuel was in the next world talking to his father, his father told him he was going to die soon. Does that mean the dead know what is happening and what is going to happen? It's possible that because Shmuel was so great, souls in Gan Eden were given a kind of alert that this great soul would soon be arriving. It could be that souls somehow get some information about what's going on in the world, but they don't know everything. They know specific things when there is a reason for them to know, but they most likely don't get all the details.