What can Jewish funerary inscriptions tell us about Jewish notions of death and afterlife? The discovery, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of several large collections of Jewish epitaphs sparked a lively interest in precisely that question. Yet in due course it also led, perhaps inevitably, to various scholarly controversies concerning the interpretation of individual inscriptions and the formulae they contain. Here I briefly review these controversies, explore the methodological problems inherent in the more traditional approaches to Jewish funerary epigraphy, and suggest a different way to study Jewish epitaphs bearing on issues of death and afterlife.

Jewish funerary inscriptions have long attracted the attention of scholars interested in Jewish notions of death and life after death. Beginning to become available in considerable quantities from 1859 onwards, such inscriptions provided scholars with an exciting new means to supplement reconstructions that, until then, were based exclusively on the study of literary sources. For some time, study of literary sources and of inscriptions went hand in hand. Just as previously unknown or inaccessible literary sources concerning the Jews and their views on death and afterlife were coming to the attention of the scholarly community—for example in the form of R.H. Charles’s 1913 edition of *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English* or H. Odeberg’s 1928 edition of 3 Henoch—a whole series of previously unknown Jewish epitaphs was also brought to light. This happened particularly in Rome, where, in the early 1930s, Jean-Baptiste Frey discovered new epigraphic materials during his peregrinations in the Jewish Vigna Randanini catacomb off the Via Appia,
and in Beth Shearim (Galilee), where important large-scale excavations were undertaken beginning in 1936.\(^2\)

These and similar epigraphic discoveries generated excitement to such an extent that, at first, scholars did not fully realize that the information that can reasonably be derived from this type of evidence is limited. Thus J.-B. Frey, author of the first modern corpus of Jewish inscriptions, and B. Lifshitz, editor of the inscriptions found during the excavations in Beth Shearim, both published separate articles in which they accepted wholeheartedly the slightest turning of a phrase as a significant reference to yet another notion of (Jewish) post-mortem existence. Considering the eagerness with which they set about their work, it should perhaps not come as a surprise that these articles have in common a near total disregard for methodological considerations.\(^3\) Citing Frey as his most important source, Lifshitz recently has summed up this approach: “It has been long since stated that a hope for eternal life is reflected in nearly all the Jewish tomb inscriptions.”\(^4\)

Instead of critiquing Frey and Lifshitz for their partisan evaluation of the pertinent evidence, it is perhaps more useful to explore the rationale for their enthusiasm. Contemplating their work, it is not difficult to discover what fueled this ebullience. As they were deciphering one inscription after another in the dark underground galleries of the catacombs, Frey and Lifshitz believed that they possessed a data-base that was enormous not merely in terms of the number of items it contained but that, in representing the Jewish community at-large, had clear advantages over the extant written sources. While such sources had often undergone a long process of redaction and possible corruption during the course of transmission over a millennium and a half or more, it could be argued that inscriptions had never been subject to subsequent editing. On the contrary, inscriptions always preserve—as long as they survive—their original word-

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