DIALOGUES OF THE DEAD: TALKING EPITAPHS BY SEPHARDI AND ASHKENAZI RABBIS OF HAMBURG

Carsten L. Wilke
Salomon Ludwig Steinheim-Institut für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte an der Universität Duisburg-Essen

During the seventeenth century, the almost simultaneous arrival of Sephardi and Ashkenazi refugees in Amsterdam, Hamburg and London generated social antagonism between Portuguese magnates and Polish paupers, and stimulated cultural self-definition on both sides. The problematic Ashkenazi self-image henceforth manifested itself in its ambivalent appraisal of the Sephardim: the piety of the latter, whose ancestors had feigned Christianity, seemed dubious to many a traditionalist, whereas modernists vowed an almost unlimited admiration for their aesthetic and scientific culture. The presence of Sephardi models in the reform controversy has popularized a construction that sees the two main Jewish cultures as mutually-exclusive value systems, competing in a relentless struggle for the essence of Judaism. The historian, however, is left to ask whether this competition was already at work in the early modern age and,

---


if so, whether it really precluded a mutual appreciation of their distinctive traditions and a genuine exchange between them.

There is hardly a sight that more impressively visualizes the encounter than the Jewish cemetery of Altona where, from 1611 to 1871, Sephardim and Ashkenazim of the Elbe cities buried their dead on two neighbouring plots of land. The Sephardi section of the graveyard is covered with horizontal marble platforms and triangular ‘tents’ (ohalim), whose exuberant sculptural decoration is dominated by the baroque symbols of memento mori. Inscriptions, most of them rather sober, use not only the Hebrew, but also the Portuguese, Spanish and French languages. By contrast, the deceased of the Ashkenazi community rest under rows of stelae, and in the rare cases that figurative ornaments appear, they are submerged by a stream of exclusively Hebrew writing. Long and sophisticated specimens of poetry or rhymed prose can often be found on the withered stones. From the point of view of aesthetics, both groups seem to belong to different worlds.

Did these worlds communicate, and how? I will concentrate on a literary device which, as far as Jewish epigraphy is concerned, stands out by its rarity: the direct speech of the dead in his or her epitaph. In classical antiquity, the poetic convention of making the gravestones speak about the dead, or of making the dead themselves comment on their demise, appears from the very time the epitaph became a literary genre. Simonides of Ceos (556–468 BCE), who is credited with this invention, is best known for the famous distich he wrote for the graves of the defenders of the Thermopylae:

Tell the Spartans, stranger passing by,  
that here, obedient to their laws, we lie.

The talking epitaph creates a virtual situation of communication. Literary illusion allows the dead Spartans to send a message, via the poet, to the living reader, a message the latter shall pass on to the surviving Spartans. Of course, the author of the message is in reality the poet, and its final addressee is the reader. The message is one about loyalty that transcends the border between life and death. In other words, the fictitious conversation with the dead gives credentials to a discourse about death, or rather, a discourse about life and its ultimate values.