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Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim

IN THE HEART OF THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

Ha-Rav Shlomo Aviner on...

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Is it Permissible to have a Séance?

Question: Are there permissible ways to speak to the deceased, such as a séance?

Answer: Everyone knows what is written in the Torah. "There shall not be found among you...one who inquires of Ov or Yidoni or one who consults the dead" (Devarim 18:10-11. Rashi explains that "Ov" is a type of witchcraft in which the deceased would speak through one's armpit). According to the Rambam, any type of consultation with the dead is absolutely prohibited (Hilchot Avodat Cochavim 11:13). According to the Ra"am quoted in the Hagahot Maimoniyot (ibid.), it is forbidden to communicate with the body of the deceased, but it is permissible to communicate with the soul of the deceased. This is because it is forbidden to consult the "dead" – the body died, the soul did not. Some explain, however, this is problematic because the soul also has a physical part to it called "Shitufa De-guf – partner of the body" which resides in the bones. This dispute is found in the Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 179:14.

There is a responsum of Rav Kook (Shut Da'at Cohain Yoreh De'ah #69) to a Rabbi in Romania regarding this issue. There were people who were desecrating Shabbat by keeping their stores open. The Rabbi spoke out against this, but the people did not listen. He knew how to communicate with the dead, so he invited one person and called his grandfather. The grandfather yelled at him, "Shabbos!" The people in the community began to complain that the Rabbi was consulting the dead. The Rabbi asked Rav Kook his opinion. Rav Kook said that it was forbidden because it is what is called "Sefek sefeka de-chumra" – a double-doubt about which we are strict regarding a Torah prohibition. There is a doubt about

whether we rule the Rambam or the Ra"am. And even if we follow the opinion of the Ra"am, which permits communicating with the soul, how can you be sure that you are enough of an expert to know that you are only communicating with the soul and not the body? In sum, Rav Kook rules it is forbidden.

The only possible way of communicating with the deceased is in a dream. A person, before he goes to sleep, can pray to Hashem that his father z"l or loved one come to him in a dream. He does not consult with the dead, he asks Hashem to do him a kindness and have him revealed to him in a dream. Nonetheless, since the person comes in a dream, not everything he says is necessarily true. Rav Kook relates that when he was in Yafo, there was a Jewish doctor who would speak with the dead. One day he said to Rav Kook: I stopped. Rav Kook asked: Why? He answered: Because they lie. Not every deceased person lies, but some do. Therefore, speaking with the dead is forbidden, and even someone who violates the prohibition, it is not clear that he is receiving anything worthwhile.

In the responsa to the Rabbi, Rav Kook says that mediums like this do not strengthen faith, and that one should fulfill the verse, "You shall be wholesome with Hashem, your G-d" (Devarim 18:13). Our Rabbi, Rav Tzvi Yehudah, would add that Rav Kook would nullify the value of stories like the one of the Rabbi from Romania, and Hashem will only be praised through people performing kindness, justice and knowing Hashem" (see Tzvi Kodosh of Rav Aviner p. 36).