

“haYalda hameta” (“The Dead Child”), 1935

As Dov Sadan has suggested, “haYalda hameta” echoes the protest of the Maskilim against the traditional custom of burial shortly after death.²⁹ The contention that some people were buried who were not really dead, but were perhaps in coma or shock, was rooted not only in fact, but in the prevalence of folktales to this effect. The story as told by Agnon gains its power not only from the natural situation, but also from the alleged personal relationship (the child was his grandfather’s sister), and the effective biblical style whose composure enhances the terror of the tale.

When the grandfather’s sister seems to have died, she is quickly buried. That night the child awakes in her grave, rubs off the shards they have placed on her eyes, and knocks on the door of her grave. When she cannot get out, she comes to each of her brothers in a dream and tells them of her plight. In the morning the brothers are shocked to discover that they had similar dreams, but they all dismiss them as fantasies. The next night, after the mourners have left, the child enters her house, her hands bruised. When she tells her mother how she has wounded her hands, the mother bandages them with her kerchief. The child chats with her, but does not want to talk to her brothers because they rejected her the previous night. Shortly before dawn, she rises to leave and all the mother’s pleading cannot detain her for she has to go to “her place.” The candle and glass of water placed in a house of mourning quiver, apparently indicating the moment of actual death. The girl washes her hands in the glass of water and leaves. After the period of mourning, the family visits the cemetery to place a tombstone on the grave and notices that the earth over her grave has been turned over.