

## *Covering Mirrors in the Shivah Home*

By: ZVI RON

One of the signature symbols of Jewish mourning is the covering of mirrors in the house where mourners sit *shivah*. When my father Shlomo Zalman Ron ז"ל recently passed away and we were preparing the house, his caretaker, Melvin Manalo, a native of the Philippines, remarked that in his homeland they also cover mirrors in a house of mourning. When I mentioned this to a neighbor, he wondered if this is a vestige of crypto-Judaism in the Philippines. A short time later I ran into a native of Sri Lanka working locally and when I asked him about mourning customs in his homeland he replied that in Sri Lanka they also cover mirrors in a house of mourning. These exchanges spurred me to investigate the origin of this popular Jewish mourning custom.

Ancient mirrors were made out of polished metal, like the copper mirrors donated to make the Altar in the Tabernacle (Ex. 38:8). Glass mirrors were introduced in 14<sup>th</sup> century Venice; however, the images were blurred and distorted. The technology to make perfectly reflective hand and full-length mirrors was developed only in the late 1600s.<sup>1</sup> During all this time there is no mention of covering mirrors as a custom of Jewish mourning.

The earliest reference to this custom is found in the writings of R. Moses Sofer, the Hatam Sofer (1762–1839). This explanation is found in the additional notes placed between a eulogy delivered in March, 1832 (II Adar, 5592) and another given in December, 1834

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Panati, *Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Things* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987) pp. 229-230.

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(Kislev, 5595).<sup>2</sup> He explains that mirrors were turned around to face the wall based on the mourning practice of *kefiat hamittah*, overturning the beds. The Babylonian Talmud (*Mo'ed Katan* 15b) gives Bar Kappara's reason for this practice. Man was created in the image of God; because of human sin resulting in death this Divine image is 'overturned.' To represent this idea we overturn our beds. The Jerusalem Talmud (*Mo'ed Katan* 3:5) gives another reason. The marital bed is the facilitator for relations between husband and wife to create new life.<sup>3</sup> This facilitator is overturned when a life has ended. Hatam Sofer explains that although we no longer practice the overturning of beds,<sup>4</sup> the reasons given in both Talmuds apply to mirrors as well. Mirrors contain the image of the person looking into them, so mirrors are turned around because the Divine image in the deceased has been 'overturned.' Additionally, Rashi (Ex. 38:8) explains that in Egypt mirrors facilitated relations between husband and wife, just like the beds. Therefore the mirrors are turned around in a house of mourning, just as beds were overturned in

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<sup>2</sup> R. Moses Sofer, *Hatam Sofer: Derashot* (New York: Avraham Yitzchak Friedman, 1961) vol. 2, p. 774. Although it has been reported that the custom of covering mirrors was mentioned already in the 1700s by R. Yehuda Ayish, a prominent 18<sup>th</sup> century Algerian rabbi (Yitzhak (Eric) Zimmer, "Kefiat HaMittah b-Aveilut v-Gilgulei Hilkhata v-Hanhagata," *Sinai* 115 (1995) p. 249), in fact it is the later Algerian rabbi R. Eliyahu Gig, in his book *Zeh Hashbulhan* (Algeria: 1888), vol. 2, Laws of Mourning 78:5, p. 177, who states that the custom of his community is to cover the mirrors in a house of mourning when the male head of the household dies. The custom is not mentioned by R. Yehudah Ayish in his own listing of Algerian mourning customs, *Beit Yehudah* (Livorno: 1746), pp. 115b-116. R. Gig in his introduction to *Zeh Hashbulhan* writes that while he based some of his book on the writings of R. Ayish, he added many customs, including newer ones, *הדשים גם ישנים*, not mentioned before. No explanation of the custom is given, or why it applies only if the deceased is male. All subsequent discussions of this custom do not distinguish between males and females. See also note 23 below.

<sup>3</sup> Based on the commentary *Korban ha-Eidah* on the Jerusalem Talmud.

<sup>4</sup> For the reasons that *kefiat hamittah* was discontinued, see *Tosafot, Mo'ed Katan* 21a, s.v. *Eilu, Shulhan Arukh Y.D.* 387:2 and Zimmer's comprehensive article above, note 2.

Talmudic times. Note that this explanation applies specifically to turning mirrors around, just as beds were overturned, but does not relate to covering mirrors. Based on this explanation, some authorities ruled that in fact covering mirrors may not be sufficient; they must be turned around, though most authorities do not make such a distinction.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, if turning mirrors parallels and substitutes for *kefiat hamittah*, then just as the beds are not overturned on Shabbat, so too the mirrors should not be turned around on Shabbat.<sup>6</sup> This would also mean that every mirror should be covered in the home of a mourner even if it is in a remote part of the house that the mourner does not use, just as all the beds in the home of the mourner were overturned.<sup>7</sup> The association of covering mirrors with *kefiat hamittah* is the explanation favored by R. Joseph Soloveitchik, though it is sometimes expressed in a somewhat different manner than the Hatam Sofer. R. Aharon Ziegler reports in the name of R. Soloveitchik that the connection between overturned beds and mirrors is that both act as reminders that intimate relations are suspended during the *shivah*; furthermore, mirrors are an expression of vanity and should not be used in a house of mourning.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> R. Ovadia Yosef in *Yabia Omer* part 4, *Yoreh De'ah, siman* 35:3 states that it is not necessary to turn the mirrors around, since many mirrors today are attached to walls; covering is enough. However, see Nachum Yevrov, *Kitzur Hilkhot Aveilut u-Bikkur Holim* (Jerusalem: 2001) p. 439, note 3, and Gavriel Singer, *Nitei Gavriel, Hilkhot Aveilut* (Jerusalem: 2000) vol. 1, p. 489, note 16, who explain that turning the mirror around may be needed, not just covering.

<sup>6</sup> This is the opinion of both R. Moshe Feinstein and R. Joseph Soloveitchik; see the article by R. Schachter in *Kavod ha-Rav* (New York: Student Organization of Yeshiva, 1992) p. 278.

<sup>7</sup> Schachter, p. 278. However, see R. Chaim Goldberg, *Pnei Barukh* (Jerusalem: 1986) p. 501, who gives the opinion that this is not necessary.

<sup>8</sup> R. Aharon Ziegler, *Halakhic Positions of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1998) p. 122. The idea that mirrors as a symbol of vanity should be covered during mourning is given as the primary reason for the custom by R. Moshe Sternbuch in *Teshuvot v-Hanhagot* (Jerusalem: 1994) *Yoreh De'ah, siman* 585, p. 473. The rationale for covering mirrors is given as the reason for turning around or covering pictures of peo-

R. Moshe Eliezer Dunat (Hungary, 1861–1930) explains that the reason for the custom to turn around mirrors is that “mirrors bring joy,” which should be avoided by mourners. Again, the custom recorded is turning mirrors around rather than covering them.<sup>9</sup>

R. Menachem Pollack (Hungary/United States, 1890–1953) in his book of responsa *Helek Levi*, explains that mirrors are covered in a house of mourning because it is customary to pray there and one should not pray facing a mirror, lest it be thought that he is bowing to the image in the mirror.<sup>10</sup> Here we finally find an explicit reference to covering mirrors rather than turning them around. This is the explanation favored by R. Ovadia Yosef.<sup>11</sup> Note that the general idea of not praying opposite a mirror was already mentioned in the 1500s by Radbaz (R. David ben Zimra, Chief Rabbi of Egypt),<sup>12</sup> but the first association between this and covering mirrors in a house of mourning appeared only hundreds of years later.

With this explanation we have the three most popular explanations for this custom. All of them were brought by R. Leopold Greenwald (Transylvania/Columbus, Ohio, 1888–1955) in his classic work on Jewish mourning, *Kol Bo al Aveilut*, making them the most well-known explanations for covering mirrors.<sup>13</sup> These approaches are the standard explanations found in halakhic guide-books intended for popular use, both in Hebrew and in English.<sup>14</sup> It

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ple in the *shivah* house as well. See the note by Rav Tukachinsky’s son in *Gesher ha-Hayyim* vol. 1, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> R. Moshe Eliezer Dunat (Donath), *Dibburei Emet* (Bardiow: Horovitz, 1931) p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> R. Menachem Segal Pollack, *Helek Levi* (Szechenyi: Friedman Miskolc, 1934) *Yoreh De’ab, siman* 132, p. 123a.

<sup>11</sup> *Yabiah Omer* part 4, *Yoreh De’ab, siman* 35:3.

<sup>12</sup> Responsa of Radbaz, part 4, *siman* 107 (1,178). See the discussion in *Yabiah Omer* part 4, *Yoreh De’ab, siman* 35:3.

<sup>13</sup> R. Yekutiel Yehuda (Leopold) Greenwald, *Kol Bo al Aveilut* (New York: Moria, 1947) p. 262.

<sup>14</sup> See for example: R. Chaim Goldberg, *Pnei Barukh* (Jerusalem: 1986) p. 109, note 8, R. Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969) pp. 102–104, R. Abner Weiss, *Death and Bereavement: A Halakhic Guide* (New York: Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, 1991) p. 94.

is interesting to note that all of the early rabbis who explain this custom are from the general area of Hungary, Romania and Transylvania.<sup>15</sup>

However, there is another explanation given for this custom. The Zohar (*Pekudei* 266a-266b) teaches that looking in mirrors too much leads to arrogance and gives power to various evil spirits. R. Yonatan Eybeschütz (1690–1764) takes this idea further and writes that every picture and graven image has an impure spiritual force (רוח רעה) attached to it. Therefore people should be careful not to have any such thing in their homes. Furthermore, one must be especially careful about looking into mirrors unnecessarily since spirits can enter the reflection in the mirror.<sup>16</sup> Based on this idea, R. Joseph Schwartz (Romania, 1875–1944) in his *Ginzei Yosef* explains that mirrors are covered in the *shivah* house because evil spirits (מזיקין ורוחות רעות) are commonly found in the home where a death occurred. In order not to see these evil spirits in a mirror, it is turned around.<sup>17</sup> This is also the primary reason for the custom given by R. Gershon Marber (Warsaw/Antwerp, 1872–1941) in his book on the laws of mourning, *Darkhei ha-Hayyim*. He quotes R. Eybeschütz and adds that during *shivah* these spirits can more easily attach themselves to the reflection in a mirror, so they are covered to protect the mourners.<sup>18</sup> This mystical reason is sometimes given in addition to the three non-supernatural explanations<sup>19</sup> but appears

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<sup>15</sup> Zimmer, p. 250.

<sup>16</sup> R. Yonatan Eybeschütz, *Yearot Devash* (Jerusalem: Machon Or HaSefer, 1988) vol. 1, *derush* 2, p. 36. This is also brought as a source for the idea that people should not be photographed; see Ari Wasserman, *Hegyonei ha-Parashah* (New York: Feldheim, 2008), vol. 1, pp. 97-98, and also *Or Israel* vol. 21 (Monsey, 2001), p. 257 for the common practice to be lenient in this matter.

<sup>17</sup> R. Joseph Schwartz, *Ginzei Yosef* (Deva: Markowitz and Friedman, 1930) p. 320. This explanation was first published by Schwartz in his journal *Vayelaket Yosef*, vol. 14, no. 11 (Adar 1912) p. 83, *siman* 110.

<sup>18</sup> R. Gershon Marber, *Darkhei ha-Hayyim* (Bilgoraj: Neta Kronenberg, 1937) p. 128.

<sup>19</sup> R. Ovadia Yosef and R. Moshe Sternbuch bring this explanation but note that it is not the primary reason for the custom. In *Sefer Netivot ha-Ma'arav*, by Eliyahu Biton, a book of Moroccan customs (Jerusalem:

as the sole reason for the custom in the popular books of Jewish customs, *Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun*<sup>20</sup> and *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Minhagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim*.<sup>21</sup>

What is the source for the idea that evil spirits may attach themselves to reflections in mirrors? The Talmud (*Berakhot* 54b, see Rashi) notes that some say mourners need special protection from evil spirits (מזיקין). In the ancient world, spirits were believed to be visible in reflective surfaces. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE the Greeks had developed a practice of divination called catoptromancy, where the future was thought to be made visible in a mirror or other reflective surface such as the water in a small bowl. This practice was adopted by the Romans as well.<sup>22</sup> It was considered a very bad omen for the reflective object to fall or break during divination, the origin of the superstition that a broken mirror leads to seven years of bad luck.<sup>23</sup> This practice spread to any shiny or reflective surface, such as crystal, fingernails, oil and even egg shells. The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 101a) mentions the 'princes of oil' and 'princes of eggs' that Rashi explains are *shedim* that are asked questions through oil, eggshells and even thumbnails. The replies that they give are not to be trusted.<sup>24</sup> Rashi also mentions consulting 'princes of cups' through use of glass cups and 'princes of thumbs' that were consulted through the

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Makhon Bnei Yissakhar, 1998) p. 157 note 34, it is brought as the reason על פי תורת הסוד.

<sup>20</sup> Avraham Hershovitz, *Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun* (Lemberg: 1929) fourth edition, p. 303. Note that the custom of covering mirrors is not mentioned in the first three editions of this popular work.

<sup>21</sup> Abraham Sperling, *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Minhagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim* (Jerusalem: Shai Lamora, 1999) p. 434 in the notes on the bottom of the page.

<sup>22</sup> The Talmud (*Hullin* 41b) and midrash note that reflections in water were also significant in pagan worship. See Maharitz Chajes, *Hullin* 41b.

<sup>23</sup> Panati, p. 11. Note that some associated a broken mirror with death: Breaking a looking-glass betokens a mortality in the family, commonly the master." John Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1893) p. 170.

<sup>24</sup> See also the commentary *Yad Ramah* to *Sanhedrin* 101a.

use of a knife with a black handle (*Sanhedrin* 67b, *dekapid*).<sup>25</sup> The idea of consulting spirits through reflective surfaces was well known to both Jews and Gentiles throughout medieval times.<sup>26</sup> Rashi (Gen. 42:14) and Rashbam (44:5) both explain that Joseph claimed to use his special goblet for the purposes of divination<sup>27</sup> and Radak mentions divining by means of shiny arrowheads, swords, thumbnails and mirrors (Ez. 21:26).

Spirits could be seen in all reflective surfaces, mirrors included. Still, we do not find a Jewish custom for mourners to cover all reflective surfaces, only mirrors. However, we do find customs to cover reflective surfaces in general in other cultures. For example, throughout Scotland in the death room it was customary to have “mirrors and windows covered with sheets and curtains.”<sup>28</sup> This custom was reported by Rev. George Low in his *History of Orkney*, a study of the Orkney Islands, north of Scotland. Low lived in Orkney from 1774 until his death in 1795, decades before the first mention of this custom in Jewish sources. He writes, “Funeral ceremonies [in Orkney] are much the same as in Scotland. The corpse is laid out after being stretched on a board, in a bed and thus continues till it is to be confined in order to be buried. I know not for what reason they lock up all the cats of the house, and cover all looking glasses as soon as any of the family dies, nor can they give any satisfactory account of it.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, “in some parts of Ger-

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<sup>25</sup> The idea that there is a ‘prince of thumbnails’ may be the origin of the custom to hide the thumbnail when looking at the fingernails by the light of the *havdalah* candle; see Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Atheneum, 1984) p. 308, note 26.

<sup>26</sup> Trachtenberg, pp. 219-222.

<sup>27</sup> See also Theodor Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) pp. 218-222.

<sup>28</sup> F. G. Vallee, “Burial and Mourning Customs in a Hebridean Community,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 85, no. 1/2, 1955, p. 123, note 1.

<sup>29</sup> *History of Orkney* (Kirkwall: Orkney Heritage Society, 2001), p. 55. Thanks to Richard Muirhead for his help with this book. Low is quoted in Richard Gough, *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain* (London: J.

many and Belgium after a death not only the mirrors but everything that shines or glitters (windows, clocks, etc.) is covered up.”<sup>30</sup> This is based on the superstition that the reflection in a mirror, or even in water, can trap a person’s soul.<sup>31</sup> This belief is already found in ancient Greece, where “looking at one’s reflection could invite death, because the reflection captured the soul.”<sup>32</sup> This idea persisted over many centuries in many cultures. This custom to cover mirrors after a death occurs is found all over the world, including the places where all the earliest Jewish references to the custom originated, Hungary,<sup>33</sup> Romania<sup>34</sup> and Transylvania.<sup>35</sup> Besides the countries already mentioned it has been documented in places as diverse as the Dominican Republic,<sup>36</sup> England,<sup>37</sup> China,<sup>38</sup> India and Mada-

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Nichols, 1796) vol. 2, p. ccv, and G.F. Black, *County Folklore*, vol. 3, *Orkney and Shetland Islands* (London: David Nutt, 1903) p. 216.

<sup>30</sup> James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1900) second edition, vol. 1, p. 294.

<sup>31</sup> Frazer, pp. 292–295.

<sup>32</sup> Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History* (London: Routledge, 2001) p. 102.

<sup>33</sup> Karoly Viski, *Hungarian Peasant Customs* (Budapest: Dr. George Vajna & Co., 1932) p. 176.

<sup>34</sup> A. Murgoci, “Customs Connected With Death and Burial Among the Romanians,” *Folklore* (1919) vol. 30, p. 92.

<sup>35</sup> Laurence Rickels, *The Vampire Lectures* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Wayland D. Hand, ed., *The Frank C. Baum Collection of North Carolina Folklore* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1964) vol. 7, p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> Charlotte Sophia Burne, *The Handbook of Folklore* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd., 1914) p. 66. See also Frazer, p. 294. This custom was especially prevalent in rural England; see *The Atlantic Monthly* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1894) p. 572.

<sup>38</sup> R.F. Johnston, *Lion and Dragon in Northern China* (London: Murray, 1910) p. 294. The explanation given there is that “every mirror has a mysterious faculty of invisibly retaining and storing up everything that is reflected on its surface, and that if anything so ill-omened as a corpse or ghost were to pass before it, the mirror would thenceforth become a permanent radiator of bad luck.” Furthermore, “In some households mirrors are covered up or turned upside down, not only when a corpse is in the house, but after sundown every day, for it is thought that evil spirits and other unlucky influences are free at night to wander whither they



gascar.<sup>39</sup> It has been reported among Christians, Muslims<sup>40</sup> and African tribes.<sup>41</sup> The custom was considered “common among Irish Catholics, but not confined to them” and widespread throughout the United States, among both blacks and whites.<sup>42</sup> An early depiction of this custom is found in a silk embroidery by Prudence Punderson (1758–1784) entitled “The First, Second and Last Scene of Mortality,” years before any mention of this in Jewish sources. The scene representing mortality shows a coffin with a covered mirror behind it.<sup>43</sup> When President Lincoln’s body lay in state at the White House, part of the preparations included covering windows and mirrors. “The East Room, in which the remains were laid, was decorated in mourning... the windows at either end of the room were draped with black barege [a sheer fabric], the frames of the mirrors between the windows, as well as those over the marble mantles, being heavily draped with the same material. The heavy

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will, and that if they pass in front of a mirror that is not covered that mirror will become a source of danger and unhappiness to the family that owns it.” In some parts of China, however, mirrors are used for the opposite effect, to frighten spirits away. See for example A. R. Wright, “Some Chinese Folklore,” *Folklore*, vol. 14 no. 3 (Sept. 19, 1903) p. 297 (see there also the interesting Chinese custom to tie a red string on the wrist of a baby, p. 298) and Frazer, p. 293 note 2.

<sup>39</sup> Frazer, p. 294.

<sup>40</sup> Frazer, p. 294.

<sup>41</sup> Edwin Radford and Mona Radford, *Encyclopedia of Superstitions* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949) p. 174, James Macdonald, *Religion and Myth of Africa* (London: D. Nutt, 1883) p. 24, Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Louisiana State University Press, 2007) p. 166.

<sup>42</sup> Hand, pp. 80-81. Rebecca Shrum, *Mirroring Others/Fashioning Selves: A History of the Looking Glass in America* (Doctoral dissertation, University of South Carolina, 2007) gives numerous reports of mirrors covered after a death among 19th century (non-Jewish) Americans; see there pp. 151-152 for reports from freed slaves and pp. 164–166 for instances among whites. She suggests that the custom may have been introduced to America through slaves who brought the custom from Africa.

<sup>43</sup> Martha B. Katz-Hyman and Kym S. Rice, eds., *World of a Slave* (Greenwood Press, 2011) p. 346: “In a late 18th century Connecticut needlework picture by Prudence Punderson, a covered mirror hangs over a coffin.”

gildings of the frames were entirely enshrouded, while the plates of the mirrors were covered with white crape.”<sup>44</sup> This custom already appeared at the funeral of the first United States President to die in office, William Henry Harrison, in 1841.<sup>45</sup> The custom was so widely known that the term “crepe hanger” was used to denote a pessimist, a naysayer.<sup>46</sup> Another example, in the Caribbean: “the sickroom mirror had to be covered lest the reflection of the corpse attach itself to the glass. The clock, too, was hooded; otherwise the glance of the departing soul would freeze it forever at the instant of death.”<sup>47</sup> The reason a sickroom mirror is covered is that “in time of sickness, when the soul might take flight so easily, it is particularly dangerous to project it out of the body by means of the reflection in a mirror.”<sup>48</sup> The explanation for “the widespread custom of covering up mirrors or turning them to the wall after a death has taken place in the house” is that “it is feared that the soul, projected out of the person in the shape of his reflection in the mirror, may be carried off by the ghost of the departed.”<sup>49</sup> Others have suggested that this custom is “traceable to a fear lest the disembodied spirit, wandering about in search of its former abode, might project itself into the mirror in which it beheld its likeness, and thus be irretrievably

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<sup>44</sup> William T. Coggeshall, *The Journeys of Abraham Lincoln* (Columbus: Ohio State Journal, 1865) p. 110.

<sup>45</sup> Claire A. Faulkner, “Arlington’s Ceremonial Horses and Funerals at the White House”, *White House History* 19, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> See World Wide Words, issue 650, August 2009, where the idiom is explained as being based on the practice of “Undertakers’ assistants... literal crêpe hangers, engaged to drape black crêpe across the windows and mirrors of a house in which a person has died.”

<sup>47</sup> Paul Witcover, *Zora Neale Hurston, Author* (New York: Chelsea House, 1991) p. 44.

<sup>48</sup> This is also the reasoning behind the superstition not to allow a very young baby to look into a mirror, since its soul is not considered to be strongly anchored in its body yet. See Radford, pp. 37, 174.

<sup>49</sup> Frazer, pp. 294-295. This is also the explanation given to me by Melvin Manalo for the practice of covering mirrors in the Philippines.

injured.”<sup>50</sup> These beliefs may also be behind the widespread cross-cultural custom to pour out the water in a house where a person died, since the water provides a reflective surface that can trap a soul.<sup>51</sup>

While the Talmud and medieval Jewish sources talked about *shedim* seen in reflective surfaces, there was no mention of an individual’s soul being projected onto or trapped in a reflection. Furthermore, the idea that the spirit of the deceased is malevolent and may seek to harm the living through a reflection is alien to Jewish belief. This, however, is a widespread folk belief throughout the Gentile world and led to the custom of covering mirrors in the room of a dying person and the house of mourners. According to this superstition, it is only in the house where the death has taken place that this has to be done, and only until the burial, while the ghost of the departed lingers.<sup>52</sup> Since Gentiles would sometimes delay burials for days, the mirrors would be covered for a while. The idea that souls of the deceased can be seen in reflections is a widespread folk belief even today and is found in many ghost stories.<sup>53</sup> This superstition led to the belief that spirits of the deceased could be photographed<sup>54</sup> and that images of the dead can be permanently imprinted on mirrors.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> A.P. Bender, “Beliefs, Rites and Customs of the Jews Connected with Death, Burial and Mourning” in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* vol. VII (London: D. Nutt, 1894) p. 117.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1998) vol. 6, p. 82 note 2.

<sup>52</sup> Frazer, p. 294.

<sup>53</sup> An entire book has been written on the subject, Leslie Rule, *Ghost in the Mirror: Real Cases of Spirit Encounters* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> See Barbara Allen, “The “Image on Glass”: Technology, Tradition, and the Emergence of Folklore,” *Western Folklore* vol. 41, no. 2 (April 1982), pp. 93–102.

<sup>55</sup> In folklore studies it is categorized as motif D1323.1.1. *Magic mirror reflects the face of whoever dies*, Stith Thompson, *The Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Copenhagen and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955–1958). Variants include *the magic mirror which imprints the face of one who is dying*, see Mildred B. Nelson, “An Image: Borrowed and New,” *Western Folklore* vol. 29, no. 4 (Oct. 1970), p. 247 note 2.

The custom to cover mirrors in a house of mourning was not originally mandated by rabbinic authorities. The earliest discussions of this custom relate to a practice that was already widespread but needed some rabbinic approval. It seems that Jews picked up this custom from their neighbors, it resonated with them and eventually became an officially authorized practice.<sup>56</sup> It is not surprising that Ḥatam Sofer was the first rabbinic authority to provide a halahhic background to this custom. He is well known for both his conservative attitude toward the preservation of Jewish customs<sup>57</sup> and his antagonism to the attempts of the Reform movement to change these customs.<sup>58</sup> This led him to provide meaningful Jewish reasons for practices that were observed at the time by religious Jews, even when they originated from local folklore or historical circumstances,<sup>59</sup> in order to show that Jewish customs are always rooted in ancient traditions and not susceptible to change or outside influence.

Although in fact non-Jewish in origin and based on the superstition that souls of the dead can go into reflections, by now this custom is considered, at least by Jews, one of the signature symbols of Jewish mourning, the real origins forgotten.<sup>60</sup> The idea that this custom was borrowed from other cultures is mentioned in less traditional Jewish writings, but is not generally mentioned in Orthodox literature.<sup>61</sup> However, at least one contemporary Orthodox rabbi,

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<sup>56</sup> Zimmer, p. 250.

<sup>57</sup> Sperber, vol. 2, pp. 17-18, and vol. 3, pp. 5-13.

<sup>58</sup> Sperber, vol. 2, pp. 122-125. See also, Assaf Yedidya, "Orthodox Reactions to Wissenschaft Des Judentums," *Modern Judaism* vol. 31, number 1 (February 2011), p. 70.

<sup>59</sup> See for example the Ḥatam Sofer's explanation for the custom of not learning Torah on *Nittel Nacht*, Sperber, vol. 3, p. 94.

<sup>60</sup> See for example Sara Carr, *Spirituality, Values and Mental Health* (New Jersey: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007) p. 85 who writes that it is a Jewish custom that "later passed into Christian tradition."(!)

<sup>61</sup> Solomon Freehof, *Recent Reform Responsa* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1960) pp. 179-182. However, Freehof seems to misinterpret Hershovitz in *Otzar Kol Minhagei Yesburun* as saying that the reason for covering mirrors is that "the departing spirit might be caught in the mirror," when Hershovitz actually was referring to the idea mentioned by Eybeschütz that an evil spirit (רוח) would attach itself to the reflection

R. Moshe Tzuriel, has written that this is an inappropriate custom and should be discontinued, although he does not explicitly state that it originated outside of Judaism.<sup>62</sup>

The covering of mirrors in the house where a death occurred is a common practice throughout the world among many peoples, including Jews. The superstitions behind this custom are largely unknown to observant Jews today, who base their practice of this custom on the rabbinic interpretations given in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These reasons have given a Jewish context to an otherwise alien observance, helping it to become accepted and continued as a legitimate expression of Jewish mourning. ❧

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in the mirror, not the departing soul. See also Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Jewish Book of Why* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1981) p. 64, who gives, among other explanations: “the practice of covering mirrors or of turning them to face the wall, which was common among early cultures, has been explained as part of man’s primitive belief that a man’s soul was his image or shadow. The soul was reflected in a mirror (and in water). Since it was feared that when the soul of a man is projected in a mirror the ghost of the deceased may snatch it away, pains were taken not to allow man’s image or shadow to make an appearance, and mirrors were therefore covered.”

<sup>62</sup> Moshe Tzuriel, *Otzrot ha-Torah* (Bnei Brak: 2005) vol. 2, p. 1017. See there his long list of mistaken mourning customs, p. 1006.