

Parshat Vayechi

The Burial of Jacob.

The entire Parsha describes Jacob's intense awareness of his approaching death and his preparations for that moment. Jacob utilises his final days and hours, fastidiously setting his affairs in order. He musters his last ounces of strength in order to transmit his final messages, teachings and instructions to his sons. In this sense, Jacob is unique amongst the patriarchs (1). Isaac too blesses his children as he feels death approaching (27:1) but Jacob exceeds him in scope and content, communicating a truly comprehensive final testament. Despite the poetic, even esoteric nature of the messages to his children, it is apparent that he is passing on messages that will be clearly understood, signals: of approved leadership and censured behaviour, of blessing and hope. He insists that all the loose ends are tied. Our Haftara, echoes and continues this theme. It too, describes a sick King David on his deathbed settling his accounts as he instructs his son and heir, the young King Solomon, to close his unfinished affairs after his death.

BURIAL

What is it that Jacob wishes to say at this time? What is the content of his message? Much of what Jacob has to say on his deathbed can be described as his ethical and futuristic musings about his sons and their special individual roles in the administration of their future nation (see Ch.49). But that is not the whole story. Another crucial topic addressed by Jacob is his burial arrangements. Here, clear and concrete instructions are given. And it is here that our study begins; for Jacob issues instructions for his burial not once but twice. Why does Jacob repeat his request? Why is it written twice, in two forms and in two separate locations? First let us examine the verses themselves:

Chavruta

Twice in Parshat Va'yechi, Yaakov Avinu asks to be buried in Eretz Canaan:

- 1) once to Yosef - 47:29-31
- 2) once to his sons - 49:28-33

First, carefully compare these two sources; then attempt to explain why Yaakov finds it necessary to make this request twice.

Pay careful attention to what Yaakov commands Yosef, and to what Yaakov commands his sons. What is different, and what is the same?

Relate this difference to 48:7. [In other words, why is Rachel's burial a 'touchy issue'?

Review 50:1-14. Were both requests fulfilled?

Shiur

"When the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, 'Do me this favour, place your hand under my thigh as

a pledge of your steadfast loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my fathers, take me up from Egypt and bury me in their burial-place.' He replied, 'I will do as you have spoken.' And he said, 'Swear to me.' And he swore to him. And Israel bowed at the head of the bed." (47:29-31)

Some time later (see 48:1), when Jacob is truly on his deathbed, we read:

"All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in number, and this is what their father said to them as he bade them farewell, addressing each a parting word appropriate to him.

Then he instructed them, saying to them, 'I am about to be gathered to my kin(2). Bury me with my fathers in the cave which is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave which is in the field of Machpela, facing Mamre, in the land of Canaan, the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site - there, Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebecca were buried; and there I buried Leah - the field and the cave in it, bought from the Hittites.' When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed, and breathing his last, he was gathered to his people." (49:28-33)

The repetition here is puzzling, especially when we note the pedantic detail in each of the texts. In both instructions, Jacob explains his request with firm insistence and painstaking attention to minutia. At first glance, there should be no need for a second request. Indeed, each request on its own would seem to be so categorical that one is struck by its force. The repetition, certainly, would seem to be somewhat redundant.

But on closer examination, certain basic differences come to the fore, which emerge as a fundamental backbone to the story of the burial of Jacob.(3)

(In methodological terms we shall be basing ourselves on a technique which should be familiar to you by now. It is the "shtei bechinot" technique which reads a single story in a dual manner; seeing a single chapter as if it contains two distinct but parallel narratives. In this way the Torah attains a degree of complexity that a single dimension narrative can never describe.)

COMPARISONS

1. TO WHOM? The first bequest is addressed to Joseph alone. The second is directed at all the brothers.

2. OATH: The request to Joseph is accompanied by a demand that Joseph take an oath - And he said, 'Swear to me.' This detail is absent in the instruction on Jacob's deathbed.

3. NEGATIVE/POSITIVE: In the request to Joseph, the thrust is negative; "Please; do not bury me in Egypt". The emphasis is - Not Egypt! – very different to the mention of the burial destination which is described in the most concise fashion. This is in direct contrast with the later instruction to the family that positively describes the destination of the burial. Indeed, Jacob would seem to overstress the location of the burial cave in the field of Machpela. Added also there, is the precise detailing as to who is buried there. Clearly, these details are absent in the request to Joseph.

4. LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION: Joseph is addressed with a plea: "Please". The brothers are "instructed".

What does this all mean?

JOSEPH'S OATH

It would seem that Jacob summons Joseph in particular due to his position of power in Egypt. Jacob wants to ensure that his body will be allowed to leave the country. If anyone has the connections to achieve this, Joseph is the man. It would appear that leaving Egypt, even as a corpse, was a sensitive matter. We read in chapter 50 of Joseph's carefully planned, hesitant, diplomatic approach to Pharaoh requesting a permit to allow his father's body to be interned in the family burial site in Canaan. It seems evident that Joseph is asking for a favour, for an extraordinary allowance. The basis of the Egyptian resistance to the idea of burial in Canaan is denied to us by the text itself. We can only hazard a guess. Maybe it is related to their general distaste for everything foreign (4). Or possibly they did not like to see their Prime Minister express his rootedness in a foreign country (5). Remember, Jacob's funeral procession is accorded full state honours and national state mourning is proclaimed after his death (50:3,7-11). Either Jacob has become an elder statesman of Egypt, in which case his burial elsewhere would cause quite a stir. Or it is simply his status as Joseph's father. Whichever way, the issues are sensitive.

Jacob knows the delicate nature of his request and thus he addresses Joseph with respect and honour due to his position, and with the full realisation of the task that he is laying upon Joseph's shoulders. At the same time, Jacob is determined. He is adamant that he should not be buried in Egypt. He enforces an oath to add extra weight to Joseph's commitment.

Why is Jacob so insistent that he not be buried in Egypt?

THE FUTURE

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes an interesting parallel here. When was the last time that we saw someone take a pledge by placing their hand under the thigh of another person? Under what circumstances did it transpire?

"Abraham was old, advanced in years ... and Abraham said to the senior servant of his household, who had charge of his entire estate, 'Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord ... that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites amongst who I live..' (24:1-4)

What is at stake here that would demand such a solemn oath? What is at stake here is a basic issue of personal and national identity, the future of the Jewish nation. Were Isaac to have taken a wife from a local tribe, the interaction between Abraham's house and the surrounding Pagan culture would have increased and the family of Abraham would have been unlikely to develop and solidify their monotheistic practises. It was essential to bring a woman for Isaac who was not tied to the local Canaanite practises and cultural norms. In that way, the homestead was to remain untainted.

Here too:

"Jacob who had lived seventeen years with his family in Egypt, could have noticed what a powerful influence the "being gripped by the land" (47:27) was beginning to have on his descendents. How they already began to see the Jordan in the Nile, and to find in their stay in Egypt no Galut (exile). Sufficient motive this, for him to press with such ceremonious solemnity that they should not bury him in Egypt, but that they should carry him to the land of their old true homeland. Motive enough for him to say to them:

You hope and wish to live in Egypt. I do not wish even to be buried there. This is also why he did not express this wish as Jacob, from his individual personal standpoint, but as "Israel" as bearer of the national mission, as a warning of the national future of his children." (Hirsch on 47:29)

This was a crucial lesson for the Children of Israel to learn. Its execution warranted a solemn oath.

THE BROTHERS

The instruction to the brothers is phrased in very different language. There is none of the anti-Egypt rhetoric. Instead, there is an emphasis on the family's legal rights to the burial ground of Machpela. There is also a stress on the generations of family members that had been buried in that very spot; Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Leah. What is the focus here? I would suggest that the issue here is a simple familial one. The brothers are being asked to perform their duty towards their father. Families get together at burials. Yishmael and Isaac joined hands at the burial of Abraham (25:9).

Esau and Jacob overcome their differences as they lay their father to his eternal rest, together (35:29). Here too, the brothers are being asked to take Jacob - together - back to the family burial site in Hebron.

Here, there is no need to demand an oath. They are simply instructed as to the correct location of the cave, the absolute ownership of the land and the family history. This is very much a family affair. No historic ramifications. Just a child's duty to a parent.

A DUAL JOURNEY

Chapter 50 would seem to reflect these two disparate strands in Jacob's burial. The text here is virtually divided. Verses 1-11 give the "Joseph" side of Jacob's burial. Verses 12 and 13 tells us the brothers' story. Let us explain.

"And Joseph fell upon the face of his father and he cried and kissed him. And he commanded the physicians to embalm his father...The Egyptians mourned him seventy days... Joseph spoke to Pharaoh; 'Do me this favour ... let me go and bury my father'." (50:1-6)

Why does Joseph kiss and cry alone? Why do Egypt mourn for 70 days? Why does Joseph repeat the exact language with which his father addressed him, when talking to Pharaoh?

This is the Joseph side of the story, the Egypt vantage point. This is Joseph - viceroy of Egypt - who is fulfilling his father's request. Thus we have state mourning and a state funeral (v.11). But then we read verse 13 and a very different mood takes hold of us:

"His sons did for him as he had instructed them. His sons carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of Machpela, the field near Mamre, which Abraham had bought for a burial site from Ephron the Hittite."

The brothers fulfil their mission - their instruction - as if the Egypt dimension didn't exist. Once within the Canaanite borders, their mission takes on its own momentum. The description here matches perfectly all the language of their fathers' command to them.

At the end of it all:

"After burying their father, Joseph returned to Egypt,

he and his brothers" (50:14)

Joseph's mission is fulfilled. So is the mission of his brothers. They can now return to Egypt, together.

What we have described here is two dimensions of the story. The Egyptian, or anti- Egyptian story, entrusted to Joseph. And then there is a second, family story. The two instructions have different aims, different forms. They are instructed separately and their fulfillments are also described apart.

MIDRASHIC REFLECTIONS

It is interesting that this insistence upon burial in Eretz Yisrael had a power which echoes to this very day. Even nowadays, pious Jews who have lived their lives outside the borders of the Holy Land will request to be brought to their final resting place within the soil of the Land of Israel. The Midrash relates to this phenomenon in a fascinating way:

"Do not bury me in Egypt!: Why? Because (Jacob knew) that (in the plagues) the Land of Egypt would crawl with lice, crawling through his body. Alternatively, because he was concerned that the Egyptians might worship him in his death as a god.... R. Chelbo: Why did the patriarchs cherish burial in Eretz Yisrael? Because the dead of Eretz Yisrael are brought to life first of all when the Messiah arrives."

In this text, we can see the dual dimension that we have brought in our comments above. First, the negative side - Jacob's refusal to be buried in Egypt, and then the positive - the particular desire for burial specifically within the ground of Eretz Yisrael. The Midrash continues:

"A story about Rabbi Barkirya and R.Elazar who were walking in the district of Tiberias. They observed the arrival of a coffin from outside Israel which had been transported for burial within Eretz Yisrael. R. Barkirya commented: What does it help if one dies in Chutz La'aretz to be buried in Eretz Yisrael? About this phenomenon, I apply the verse (Jeremiah 2:7) "They have made my land an abomination." – in their lifetime, "And they come and defile my land" – in their state of death. R. Elazar replied: Once they are buried in Eretz Yisrael, God forgives them; as it states (Devarim 32:42): "And his land will atone for his people." (Bereshit Rabba 96:5)

Is a person who lives outside Israel and then comes to be buried there rejecting the land twice? – by refusing to live there, and then bringing the impurity of the dead within its borders. That is R. Barkirya's view. R' Elazar sees great advantage in burial in Eretz Yisrael irrespective of one's life outside that land.

THE POSTSCRIPT

The closing verses of the Book of Genesis record Joseph's final bequest to his family. It is a firm statement which has far-reaching significance.

"Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die. God will surely take notice (redeem) of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham Isaac and Jacob.' So Joseph made the sons of Israel SWEAR, saying 'When God takes notice (redeems) of you, you shall carry up my bones from here (lit. "this").' Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years. He was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt." (50:24-26)

Joseph, the man who saved Egypt, who dedicated his life to

the service of the Egyptian people, realises that after all these years, he does not really belong there. Joseph is not buried in the sandy soil of Egypt. He is embalmed, placed in a coffin and waits. He waits for the redemption from Egypt, the Exodus. The man who brought the children of Israel to Egypt will not allow his bones to be brought to rest until the entire nation has been brought to its final resting place, in Canaan. Indeed, we are told of Moses' special handling of Joseph's coffin (Ex. 14:19) and we read how, after the land is conquered and settled, Joseph is brought to rest in Sh'chem (see Joshua 24:32), the very place from whence he was sold; the place from which the entire long story began.

Why did Joseph issue this request of his brothers? Why do we not hear of a similar desire in the part of his eleven brothers? We might answer, rather simply, that Joseph has been affected by the weight of his father's instruction. Jacob's words and ideology had an impact. Maybe precisely due to the fact that Jacob expresses his final request in the negative – Not Egypt! – and he reinforces it with the power of an oath, influences Joseph. His brothers were not trained to view Egypt in this way. They knew that Machpela was important, but they never realised with the same depth, the degree to which Egypt was inappropriate, alien. Ironically, it is precisely Joseph - the Egyptian leader – who is the only son to express his own insistence that he not be buried in Egypt. He even expresses his faith in God's redemption in his oath. Joseph, the Egyptian Jew, has redemption on his mind. Even as he sits by his villa along the banks of the Nile, he yearns for the Jordan.

Shabbat Shalom

FOOTNOTES

(1) The Rabbis in the Midrash, noting this unprecedented practice, saw it as a product of Jacob's personal initiative:

" From the day that heaven and earth were created, people did not become sick. A person might have been walking in the market, he would sneeze and his soul would leave his body through his nostrils. Jacob requested mercy, 'Master of the Universe, do not take my soul until I have instructed my children and the members of my house.' God acceded to the request.... That is why one wishes a person 'life' when they sneeze" (Pirkei DeRabi Eliezer Ch.52)

Indeed, Jacob is the first Biblical personality to be described as having some sort of sickness; "Sometime afterwards Joseph was given the message, "Take note, your father is ill"(48:1). The Midrash notes the word "Hinei" - "Take note", indicative of some sense of surprise, and then immediately, the mention of illness, the first in the Torah. It connects the two together. Jacob's sickness gives him the God-sent opportunity that he wished for. Jacob is given the chance to leave everything as he would wish it to be.

(2) A phrase denoting death.

(3) Thanks to my friend and colleague, Rav Yonatan Horovitz, for his insightful analysis of the parsha which gave birth to this theory of a "dual" burial.

(4) See the fact that the Egyptians would not eat with foreigners (43:32), that the funeral procession did not enter Canaan - 50:10-13 - and the worries of Egypt - Exodus 1:9-10.

(5) It is interesting that even Joseph is denied the possibility of going to Canaan to bring his father to Egypt. He sends his brother and the royal Egyptian wagons, but he himself does not leave the borders of Egypt (see 45:19-21, 46:29).