YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat VayEchi**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**The Burial of Yaakov**

Translated by David Strauss

### I.

And the time drew near that Yisrael must die; and he called his son Yosef, and said unto him: “If now I have found favor in your sight, put, I pray you, your hand under my thigh, and deal kindly and truly with me; bury me not, I pray you, in Egypt. But when I sleep with my fathers, you shall carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their burying-place”

And he said: “I will do as you have said.”

And he said: “Swear unto me.” And he swore unto him. And Yisrael bowed down upon the bed's head. (*Bereishit* 47:29-31)

Yaakov makes Yosef swear with his hand under his thigh that he will bury him with his fathers. Why is an oath necessary? And why does the oath require that Yosef put his hand under Yaakov's thigh?

The need for an oath points to the difficulty in fulfilling the mission. Are we dealing with an emotional difficulty or with a technical difficulty, or perhaps with both?

That the mission involves a technical difficulty emerges from the verses:

And when the days of weeping for him were past, Yosef spoke unto the house of Pharaoh, saying: “If now I have found favor in your eyes, speak, I pray you, in the ears of Pharaoh, saying: ‘My father made me swear, saying: “Lo, I die; in my grave which I have dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me.” Now therefore let me go up, I pray you, and bury my father, and I will come back.’”

And Pharaoh said: “Go up, and bury your father, according as he made you swear.” (*Bereishit* 50:4-6)

Both Yosef and Pharaoh mention the oath as a compelling factor. Willy-nilly, they are obligated to fulfill it owing to its severity. Were it not for the oath, it is doubtful whether Pharaoh would permit Yosef to bury Yaakov in the land of Canaan. Why? Rashi and the Midrash speak of a desire on the part of the Egyptians to keep Yaakov's body in their midst. We would like to propose another explanation: going to the land of Canaan to bury Yaakov is both politically and military (nearly) impossible:

And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen; and it was a very great company. And they came to the threshing-floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, and there they wailed with a very great and sore wailing; and he made a mourning for his father seven days. And when the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning in the floor of Atad, they said: “This is a grievous mourning to the Egyptians.” Wherefore the name of it was called Avel-Mitzrayim (Egypt’s Mourning), which is beyond the Jordan. (*Bereishit* 50:9-11)

We learn two things from these verses: 1) The transport of Yaakov's coffin required a heavy military escort, and apparently some factor blocks the way to the gravesite. 2) The route to the Makhpela Cave goes through the threshing-floor of Atad on the east bank of the Jordan, similar to the route taken by the Israelites in order to reach the land of Canaan following the exodus from Egypt. The regular route, via the land of the Pelishtim to the Chevron Mountains, is apparently blocked to them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Despite the difficulties and owing to the oath, the funeral takes place, and Yaakov is buried with his fathers in the Makhpela Cave. Perhaps the difficulty connected to the transport of Yaakov's body from Egypt to the land of Canaan can be understood in light of the principle that the actions of the fathers are a sign for the children. Let us compare the verses regarding the burial of Yaakov and the verses regarding Moshe's request that the Israelites be permitted to leave Egypt to serve God:

And Yosef went up to bury his father; and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, and all the house of Yosef, and his brethren, and his father's house; only their little ones, and their flocks, and their herds, they left in the land of Goshen. (*Bereishit* 50:7-8)

And Moshe and Aharon were brought again unto Pharaoh; and he said unto them: “Go, serve the Lord your God; but who are they that shall go?”

And Moshe said: “We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds we will go; for we must hold a feast unto the Lord.”

And he said unto them: “So be the Lord with you, as I will let you go, and your little ones; see you that evil is before your face. Not so; go now you that are men, and serve the Lord; for that is what you desire.” And they were driven out from Pharaoh's presence. **(***Shemot* 10:8-11)

Are Yosef's brothers forced to leave their children and property in Egypt as a surety that Yosef will indeed return to the land of Egypt? There is no clear answer to this question.

### II.

It is, however, possible that the difficulty with burying Yaakov in the Makhpela Cave, which brings Yaakov to make Yosef take an oath on the matter, is an emotional difficulty. Yaakov continues, telling Yosef the following:

And as for me, when I came from Paddan, Rachel died unto me in the land of Canaan in the way, when there was still some way to come unto Efrat; and I buried her there in the way to Efrat, the same is Beit Lechem. (*Bereishit* 48:7)

Rashi explains that Yaakov is apologizing here for the fact that he could not bring Rachel's body to the Makhpela Cave, even though he wanted to do so, and therefore her burial along the road should not be construed as a sign of disrespect. However, it is possible, that even if burying Rachel on the way to Efrat was not a show of disrespect, Yosef would still prefer to take Yaakov after his death and bury her alongside Rachel, his mother, who was also Yaakov's primary wife, rather than alongside Leia in the Makhpela Cave. Therefore, Yaakov makes Yosef take an oath, that despite the separation after death, he will bury Yaakov with his fathers, with Avraham and Yitzchak.

It would appear that this is the reason that the oath involves Yosef's putting his hand under his father's thigh. Elsewhere, we explained at length that swearing with one's hand under a thigh means swearing with one's hand at the site of circumcision. In the oath taken by Avraham's servant under Avraham's thigh, the circumcision expresses the sanctity of Avraham's seed, the need to marry Yitzchak off to someone who is not a daughter of Canaan. The oath at the site of circumcision also expresses loyalty to the land, which is promised in connection with the covenant of circumcision, in Avraham's request: "Only you shall not bring my son back there" (*Bereishit* 24:8).

Yosef's oath to Yaakov at the site of circumcision also expresses the sanctity of the seed in the continuity of the chain of the Patriarchs, one alongside the other. The burial of the Patriarchs is not only a respectful way of dealing with their corpses; it is a statement regarding the Patriarchs' connection to the covenant with the land. It would eventually create the continuity between the lives and deaths of the three Patriarchs in the land of God and the return of their descendants from exile in Egypt. Indeed, *Chazal* expound as follows regarding the first encounter of those who leave Egypt with the land of their forefathers:

And they went up into the South, and came unto Chevron. (*Bamidbar* 13:22)

Kalev alone went there to prostrate himself on the graves of the Patriarchs. (Rashi ad loc.)

It is there that the circle is closed, begun when Yosef leaves his father's house and ends up in Egypt:

He sent him out of the valley of Chevron. (*Bereishit* 37:14)

We already explained elsewhere at length that "the valley of Chevron" is the Makhpela Cave. Yaakov and Yosef go down to pray there before they part for twenty-two years.

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The connection between the graves of the Patriarchs and the return from the exile to the Land of Israel finds expression in Jerusalem as well. For this is what Nechemya, the chief butler of the king of Persian and Medea, says to Artachshasta his king when he wants to return to the Land of Israel:

And I said unto the king: “If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you would send me unto Yehuda, unto the city of my fathers' graves, that I may build it.” (*Nechemya* 2:5)

And yet in our consciousness, Jerusalem is the city of God's revelation on Mount Moriya, which is a continuation in our consciousness of the assembly at Mount Sinai, where God reveals Himself to the people of Israel. Chevron is the city of the Patriarchs, the city where they (primarily) lived, and where they were buried. Our tradition which proceeds from the path of God to do righteousness and judgment that we learned from our forefathers, our tradition which proceeds from their faith in God under all conditions and with no reservations, our tradition which proceeds from their love of our holy land, draws its sustenance from Chevron. The impressive Jewish continuity preserved in Chevron during the long years of our exile and the yearning for it at all times and under all conditions, expresses the importance of our inner consciousness of our being the children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, Sara, Rivka (Rachel) and Leia; and of our continuing their tradition and their faith.

1. I am not certain about what I have written here. It is possible that the mourning over Yaakov takes place on the West Bank of the Jordan. Prof. Yoel Elitzur convincingly argues, in an article about the threshing-floor of Atad, that the words *ever ha-Yarden* in our verse ("beyond the Jordan") should be understood as *arvot ha-Yarden*, "the plains of Jordan." He suggests, based on an ancient tradition, that the threshing-floor of Atad was near the modern-day Beit Chogla (east of Route 90 in the section that bypasses Jericho from the east). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)