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INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

by Rav Alex Israel

PARASHAT VAYECHI

The Burial of Jacob

The entire parasha describes Jacob's consciousness of his approaching death and his preparations for that moment. Jacob utilizes his final days and hours, fastidiously setting his affairs in order. He gathers his strength so that he will be able 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 esoteric and poetic nature of the messages to his children, it is apparent that he is passing on certain clear signals - of approved leadership and censured behavior, of blessing and hope. He insists that all the loose ends are tied. Our haftara echoes, reflects and continues this theme. It too, describes a sick King David on his death bed instructing his son Solomon as to how to close his 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:

When the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, "Do me this favor, 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 Efron the Hittite, the cave which is in the field of Makhpela, facing Mamreh, in the land of Canaan, the field that Abraham bought from Efron 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 minutea. 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).

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." Not Egypt. But the destination is described in the most concise fashion. This is in direct contrast with the later instruction to the family which positively describes the destination of the burial. Indeed, Jacob would seem to overstress the location of the burial cave in the field of Makhpela. 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 careful and tentative approach to Pharaoh requesting a permit to allow his father's body to be interned in the family burial site in Canaan. The nature of the Egyptian resistance to the idea is unclear. 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. Remember, Jacob's funeral procession is accorded full state honors 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 honor due to his position, and with the full realization 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 the future of the Jewish nation. If Isaac were to take a wife from a local tribe, the interaction between Abraham's house and the surrounding pagan culture would increase, and the family of Abraham would be unable to develop and solidify their monotheistic practices. It was essential to bring a woman for Isaac who was not tied to the local Canaanite practices and cultural norms. In that way, the homestead would 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 descendants. 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 Makhpela. 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 stress 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. Ishmael 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 almost split up. 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 favor ... let me go and bury my father" (50:1-6).

Why does Joseph kiss and cry alone? Why does 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. 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 Makhpela, the field near Mamreh, which Abraham had bought for a burial site from Efron the Hittite."

The brothers fulfill 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.

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 enbalmed 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, realizes that after all these years, he does not really belong there. Joseph is not buried. He is 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 Shekhem (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? Joseph is his father's son. Jacob's words had an impact. Joseph - the Egyptian leader - has redemption on his mind. Even as he sits by his villa along 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.

I think it interesting that Jacob is a person who desperately wants things to be under his control. He does not enjoy surprises. This might explain his fastidiousness as to his "living will." His carefully planned approach to Esau on his return to Israel is but one example of his desire to secure the future. God, however, has a way of ensuring that things do not turn out the way Jacob might have planned. See the story of the man who wrestles with him (ch. 33), the rape of Dinah (ch. 34) and Rashi on 37:2 "Bikesh Yaakov leshev be-shalva". See also Avivah Zornberg - "Beginning of Desire" - pg. 229-233.

(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.