

VISITING THE RESTING PLACE OF A TZADIK

Category: Bereishis, Vayechi

Why was Yaakov so loath to be buried in Egypt, and why was Yosef ready to do the job?

The Vow

In a foreign country, an elderly expatriate lies on his deathbed, surrounded by loving children. His favorite son, an extremely successful, respected and powerful leader despite his relative youth, basically runs the country.

The old man and his clan have been expatriates for about 20 years now. They have plenty of real estate in their native country, including a burial plot for exactly eight individuals. Seven of those graves are occupied by the old man's wife and his immediate ancestors, including his parents and grandparents. It's only a matter of time before he joins them in eternal peace.

Everyone knows that that's where he wants to be buried. It goes without saying.

But the wise old patriarch makes an odd request. He summons his young son, the powerful chief executive, and asks that he be buried back home. And stranger still, when his son readily accedes to what was already obvious, he demands that his boy swear to carry out his final words.

Thus the stage is set for this week's Torah portion, in which a dying Yaakov binds his most beloved son Yosef, the de facto ruler of Egypt, by a solemn oath to bury him in the Machpelah Cave—where his children would have buried him anyway, both by common sense and by family tradition.

Why would they have thought of burying their father anywhere else? What was their father thinking? Did he not trust his son to follow the way of the world—and certainly the rules of their own faith—and respect a dying man's last will and testament? And even if he thought a reminder was necessary, why was an oath necessary?

The Power of the Tzaddik's Presence

Let's understand this by looking at why people visit loved ones' graves in the first place.

If we believe, as we do, that the soul ascends to heaven after death and that the body is merely flesh and bones, then what indeed are we visiting? Flesh and bones? These do not define the deceased. The soul does. But the soul has gone to heaven. The question remains.

In Judaism, however, we find a strong ancient tradition of visiting the resting places of those who came before us. The Rabbis teach us that when Calev was sent by Moshe Rabbeinu to spy on the Holy Land, Calev prayed at the graves of the Avos, the Patriarchs, for strength to resist his fellow spies' plot to discredit the Land. Halachah tells us clearly of the custom to visit the resting places of our tzadikim, holy leaders, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah.

Obviously, then, there's a lot more to a grave than bodily remains.

The Tanya, the "Bible" of Chabad Chassidism, explains that the nefesh, the lowest of the soul's five strata, remains somehow connected to the body even after death—making communication between the deceased's soul and that of its loved ones possible, if only at the subconscious level. And with this law of spiritual physics being true for ordinary people, it is all the more true for holy people—the tzadikim at whose graves Jews have prayed since ancient times.

The Jew visiting the resting places of the righteous is like the child visiting a mother at home—both are places where he or she is embraced and loved without condition, both are safe havens for the heart to pour out unfettered, both are oases of understanding and sensitivity.

Just as a man or woman needs the love of a mother, a Jewish community needs the resting place of a tzadik—a towering man of holiness who walked among them during his life, who knew their suffering intimately, who appreciated their privations, who can relate to their challenges.

That's precisely why Yosef might have buried his father in Egypt, to give the future generations a gravesite of a righteous man, a resting place of a Tzadik where they could easily come to pour out their hearts and draw strength.

This is also precisely why Yaakov made Yosef swear that he would NOT bury him in Egypt, rather he would take him to the land of Israel. And an oath was necessary to give him the strength to overcome his spiritual need to keep his father close by.

One Who Could Relate

In that case, why did Yaakov refuse to be buried in Israel where he could serve as a beacon of hope to his children and grandchildren through the dark years of slavery that were about to begin?

The explanation is as follow. Though Yaakov lived in Egypt for 17 years, Egypt did not live in him. The Egyptian Jewish experience—the slavery, the pain—was not his. His life in Egypt—a tranquil life in the Jewish colony of Goshen—ended before the horrors of slavery began. Yaakov knew that he could not relate to the suffering of the future generations. He felt that this responsibility belonged to his son Yosef.

Yosef knew what it meant to be an Egyptian Jew. Having been in Egypt since 17, he knew the culture, the society, the temptations, and the challenges they created for Jewish life. And that's precisely why it was he who was buried in Egypt.

It was Yosef, a brother, a peer and a compatriot to those Jewish slaves who came after him, whose soul could truly empathize with those who came to his grave during slavery's darkest days with prayers on their lips, pain in their hearts and tears in their eyes.

The lesson for our lives is this: If our ancestors could arrange their deaths to be of maximum benefit to their children, certainly we can arrange our lives to be of maximum benefit to our children.

In today's day and age, more than ever, the next generation needs its grandmothers and grandfathers close at hand, to build better and stronger community, to teach the youth, our grandchildren, the lessons of life, and most important of all, to communicate Yiddishkeit to the next generation.

Let our grandfathers and grandmothers stay close to their families, their sons and daughters, their grandsons and granddaughters, spiritually and physically. Let

them be involved in their lives. By doing so, we may rest assured that we carry on in their ways when they go the way of Yaakov and Yosef.