

There are any number of issues that could be addressed in this parasha:

the “adoption” by Yaaqov/Jacob of Yoseph/Joseph's 2 sons, and then, when “seeing” the two boys, Yaaqov/Jacob asks, “who is this?”

the blessing of these two sons – was it Yaaqov/Jacob's intention they should become leaders of the family?

the continuation of Yaaqov/Jacob's favouritism for Yoseph/Joseph – assigning him an extra portion of land – when there has been no indication that Yoseph/Joseph is even interested.

Yaaqov/Jacob's comment that he wrested the land from the Amorite – when did this take place???

the mix of history and prophecy in Jacob's descriptions of his sons – and the lack of evidence as to how his words were received.

As today's Torah reading is the last third of this parasha, it seemed appropriate to confine myself to this section – and – in my view this section contains three rather curious events

- 1) the detailed description of the cave of Machpela – its location, who originally owned it, who is buried there, how it was purchased, and how it came into Yaaqov/Jacob's hands,
- 2) the “manipulation” of Yoseph/Joseph by his brothers in order to remain in Yoseph/Joseph's good graces, and, so remain in Goshen
- 3) the fact that at the end of Yoseph/Joseph's life, spent insofar as we know, wholly at the beck and call of Pharaoh, he reminds his extended family (not his children) of the legacy of the Promised Land.

Aviva Zornberg opens up her discussion of Yaaqov/Jacob's detailed burial request with a discussion, initiated by Rashi, on the graphic layout of the Torah text between parasha *Vayiggash* and parasha *Vayehi* – since we are on a triennial cycle this isn't evident to us, but in the Torah scroll, there is no space marking the break between these two parshiot, unlike other parshiot where there are usually several spaces, indicating a change. Zornberg notes ((355) “this is the only instance in the Torah, where not even a minimum nine spaces separates the new parasha (*Vayehi*) from the previous one (*Vayiggash*).”

Rashi asks why is this parasha *setuma*, closed, blocked? It is suggested that when Yaaqov/Jacob calls his sons together (Gen: 49:1) so that “[he] may tell [them] what is to befall [them] in days to come” he had every intention of reminding his sons about the family legacy – that Egypt would become a place of affliction. However Yaaqov/Jacob is *nistam*, blocked, from revealing this to his sons, and once he dies, as Zornberg continues to draw from Rashi, the sons are unable to read their environmental reality, - their eyes and ears become blocked to the political shifts in Egyptian culture.

Yaaqov/Jacob's inability to directly reveal to them their future exilic experience, is given voice in the very detailed description of the place where he is to be buried.

Zornberg does not address Yaaqov/Jacob's detailed account of his burial place, and Leon Kass does not address Rashi's question of the “blocked” parasha.

It seemed to me that these two readings however blended perfectly together as an understanding of Yaaqov/Jacob's frame of mind as regards his sons – especially his Egyptian son.

Kass (*The Beginning of Wisdom*) notes that Yaaqov/Jacob does not want the family to remain in Egypt: they have a land and they should return to it, and if they do not return immediately, how then can he ensure, once he is dead, that they will remember it. By demanding an oath from Yoseph/Joseph, Yaaqov/Jacob is hoping this will guarantee that Yoseph/Joseph (and his brothers) will see to his father's burial in the cave of Machpela, and also reconsider their connection to the land.

Robert Sacks, author of *The Lion and the Ass: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*,
<http://ia600209.us.archive.org/7/items/RobertSacksACommentaryOnTheBookOfGenesis/Robert-Sacks-A-Commentary-on-the-Book-of-Genesis.pdf>

comments

“when the sons carry their father [read 50:13], they do more than carry a dead body.By taking the body of their father upon their backs they symbolically take onto themselves the responsibility of maintaining the tradition which their father had set up.”

Yaaqov/Jacob's detailed description of the ancestors buried at Machpela, and then the tangible actions of his sons in travelling to the site and burying Yaaqov/Jacob, become linked and constitute the sacred memory of B'nai Israel vis-a-vis their father's homeland. Kass notes that this memory of Machpela, and what it represents, is the *sole link* between the B'nai Israel in Egypt and the Promised Land. Not unlike other later diasporas with their memories of the Promised Land.

Kass raises the issue of the route taken by the funeral cortege – why did Yoseph/Joseph (since it had to be his decision which route the cortege would take) choose to enter Cana'an through a circuitous route across Sinai and around the Dead Sea, entering the land from trans-Jordan, rather than going the more direct route up the Mediterranean coast and across the Negev desert – Yuval Levin, A student in Kass's genesis class, comments that

“the route seems intentionally designed to avoid the [Promised] land, as if Yoseph/Joseph and his brothers are afraid of the effect the land might have on them” – ie passing through Beersheva would be a reminder of when G-D spoke directly to their father prior to their going down to Egypt...

Kass adds that the route was Yoseph/Joseph's decision since only he had the power to direct the Egyptian funeral procession, and that it was in his interests to avoid remembering his family connection to Cana'an which could only be done by spending as little time as possible in the land.

After the brothers return from burying their father Yaaqov/Jacob, they join forces to send a message to Yoseph/Joseph, a message ostensibly received by them, and not Yoseph/Joseph, from their father before he died.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his commentary on *Vayehi*, raises the question: Is it permitted to tell a white

lie? (331-336). He notes – in Judaism it is permitted – not only is a white lie permitted to save a life, but it is also permitted *for the sake of peace*. There is no evidence that Yaaqov/Jacob spoke these words (Gen 50:16-17) the rabbis assume that this message was in fact a lie but it was a permissible lie as it was done for the sake of peace. In Judaism, Sacks reminds us that peace takes precedence over truth – truth is many faceted and elusive – Sacks quotes Isaiah Berlin,

“few things have done more harm than the belief on the part of individuals or groups ... that he or she or they are in *sole* possession of the truth.”

The human grasp of truth is partial, fragmentary and incomplete, therefore while truth matters, Sacks comments, peace matters more.

Kass notes that Yoseph/Joseph deflects the brothers request for forgiveness – answering with a flippant comment – Am I substitute for G-D? For those of you who know my critical reader (and husband) interpreting text is fraught with problems. The text does not indicate how the question sounded – ie its vocality is ambiguous as we do not know what emphasis was given by the storyteller --- me, a substitute for G-D? This intonation could suggest humility and could indicate that Joseph recalled the original dream and wonders how he could have been such a callow youth; I am a substitute for G-D? Could be how the brothers hear his statement. Even though Joseph has moved on – the brothers are stuck in the horror of what they had done and can only view Yoseph/Joesph in the framework of the original dream.

With Yaaqov/Jacob's death, the last vestige of a relationship between Yoseph/Joseph and his brothers disappears – the brothers remain in Goshen building their lives and Yoseph/Joseph remains in Pharaoh's court building his.

When Yoseph/Joseph senses his time is coming to an end he speaks with his extended family (surely the brothers so much older than him have already died) and reminds them 1) G-D will bring them to the land of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaaqov, and 2) when they do return his remains are to return with them so that they can be buried in the land.

Kass comments that this is the first time Yoseph/Joseph has mentioned the names of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaaqov in this way

Like Yaakov/Jacob, he remains quiet on why G-D should deliver them from Egypt –

The family also remain “blocked” as no one seems to ask why don't they leave now for the Promised Land – why wait until the situation deteriorates – an ongoing question in Jewish history and it is important to Yoseph/Joseph that his bones return with them.

Sacks' last essay in his volume *Covenant & Conversation* is about “Jewish Time” -- not so much how to keep time or track time or use time but how we live with time – how the Jewish narrative view shapes our responses to life in the here and now – Sacks calls it *covenantal time*: the human journey as a response to the divine call.

In this chapter, his summary of *Bereishit*, Sacks comments that the narrative “*is a story without an ending*, a narrative which looks to an open future rather than reaching closure (350). At the end of Dvarim, the repeated promise of land to the heirs of Avraham, has still to be achieved – B'nai Israel are on the far side of the Jordan looking at the land – they are not yet in it.

Sacks further notes that:

1) *Neviim*, the books of the prophets, end with Malachi, and the famous line

Behold, I will send to you the prophet Elijah before the coming of great and awesome day of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers (3:24)

These books tend to look towards a time not yet reached - the Messianic Age

2) *Ketuvim*, Writings, end with Cyrus granting permission to the Jewish exiles in Babylon to return to their homeland.

Almost a thousand years after Avraham first set out for Promised Land from Ur, his descendants are again attempting to return to the land.

Even though the Yoseph cycle ends with his death and his family firmly ensconced in Egypt, *Bereishit* ends on a note of forgiveness – even if the brothers still have not forgiven themselves for what they did to Yoseph in their youth (Tea and Torah with Anna) and therefore had to create a white lie to ensure Yoseph's continued support, he seems to have moved on and forgiven them.

Sacks quotes from Hannah Arendt's, *The Human Condition*, to illustrate the connection between forgiveness and time- “Human action, she states, is potentially tragic – why?”

Because [the person] .. who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes "guilty" of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous the consequences of his deed, he can never undo it... All this is reason enough to turn away with despair from the realm of human affairs and to hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom.”

Arendt then argues that “what transforms the human situation from tragedy to hope, is the possibility of forgiveness:

“Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, ... be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover... Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.”

Sacks write so eloquently I will close my dvar with his words:

Atonement and forgiveness are the supreme expressions of human freedom - the freedom to act differently in the future than one did in the past, and the freedom not to be trapped in a cycle of vengeance and retaliation. Only those who can forgive can be free. Only a civilization based on forgiveness can construct a future that is not an endless repetition of the past. That, surely, is why Judaism is the only civilization whose golden age is in the future.

Judaism, Sacks noted, has contributed to the world the revolutionary concept of time based on human freedom – we do not follow cyclical time, nor do we follow linear time – we live in the twists and turns of *covenantal time* – sometimes responding to the divine call and sometimes not -- the response to the divine call, the possibility of repentance and return, the promise of a new society and the promise of

redemption --- may we continue to do the work required to gain the Promised Land that will sustain us all.

Shabbat Shalom and a fulfilling 2013.

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