

## Sermon

Shabbat & Shvi'i shel Pesach (Volunteer Shabbat)

כ"א ניסן תשפ"א | April 3, 2021

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One of my favorite movies scenes from my childhood is in *Home Alone*, the film starring young Macaulay Culkin. The film begins with the McCallister family, aunts, uncles, and cousins, all gathered together the night before their holiday trip to Paris. A series of chaotic events leads to the family's frantic departure for the airport. They arrive and board the plane without missing their flight. Sitting in her window seat, Kate McCallister, played by the inimitable Catherine O'Hara, turns to her husband, and expresses concern that they may have forgotten something in their hasty departure. Did they leave the coffee on? Did they leave the garage door open? And then it dawns on her: "Kevin!" They left their youngest son home alone.

My mind's eye depicts a similar scene unfolding in the Torah reading for this seventh day of Pesach. The Israelites depart from Egypt, harried and frantic after a stressful and exhausting evening. They are up all night, anxiously awaiting the plague that would strike down the Egyptian first-borns. And then the sun rises, and Pharaoh expels them from his land. They were ready, bags packed and shoes on their feet, but it still must have been a frantic departure. It would have been very easy to forget something as they made their way out of Egypt. The Torah mentions a particularly significant moment with just one verse:

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-עַצְמוֹת יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ

Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, "God will be sure to take notice of you: then you shall carry up my bones from here with you."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 13:19.

It was Joseph's deathbed wish that his brothers and their descendants inter his remains in the Land of Israel, rather than leaving him in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> But that was hundreds of years before the exodus! It would have been easy for Moses to forget this detail. In their frantic departure, I picture Moses leading the way and then remembering, "Joseph!" But the Torah assures us that Moses could not be distracted. He was determined to fulfill the oath sworn by Joseph's brothers. But it had been hundreds of years since Joseph's death, and the Torah does not tell us where exactly Joseph was buried. All we know is this final line of Genesis: "Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt." How would future generations know where he rested? Where was this coffin now? How would they fulfill this promise to inter him in the Land of Israel?

The Sages of our tradition asked similar questions, and offered their answers in several *midrashim*. They all tell a similar story, which I will summarize for you. Knowing that the Israelites could not depart without Joseph's remains, the Egyptians inter him in a metal coffin, and sink it into the Nile River, making them unreachable and inaccessible. Moses may not know how to reach the sunken coffin, but one Israelite of Joseph's generation who does know is still alive when it comes time to depart from Egypt: Serach bat Asher. Various traditions attribute her very longevity to her piety and devotion. She is the only individual who goes down to Egypt with Jacob, leaves Egypt with Moses, and enters the Land of Israel with Joshua. So, when Moses inquires of Joseph's final resting place, Serach bat Asher tells him about the metal coffin in the Nile. Moses stands on the bank of the river and cries out, "Joseph! Joseph! The time has come for God to redeem the Israelites. The Divine Presence is waiting for you. Israel is waiting for

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 50:23-24.

you. The clouds of glory are waiting for you. If you reveal yourself, all will be well; but if not, we are hereby released from your vow.” In that very moment, Joseph’s coffin floats to the surface.<sup>3</sup> Now, the Israelites can depart from Egypt, without leaving anything behind.

This final task, remembering to bring along Joseph’s remains to be buried in Israel, is no small matter. The remains are much more than mere bones—they represent a connection to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. Even though Joseph himself was not considered one of the *Avot*, his life marks a connection with the pre-enslaved history of our people, the ones with whom God directly communicated. Remembering to take his remains is a way of restoring the covenant of the past, and bringing it with them into the future. God has not forsaken the Israelites, nor have they forsaken God.

Moses, as the leader, thankfully remembers that he needs to bring along Joseph’s bones. Despite the variety of potential distractions facing Moses in this moment of their departure, Moses remains calm, cool, and collected. He focuses his attention on fulfilling the sacred task at hand, and does so by working with others and acting expeditiously. He is portrayed here as a model for an effective, strong, and compassionate leader.

But Moses could not have done it alone. Without Serach bat Asher, it would have been impossible to locate the remains. She not only holds the necessary information, but I imagine her enthusiasm in partnering with Moses to complete this holy task. She waited for hundreds of years to share this information, to collaborate with someone in fulfilling the dying wish of her late uncle, Joseph. She holds the collective memory of her people, and brings it forward to assist them in this moment of their redemption.

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<sup>3</sup> Tanchuma Beshalach 2:1

This *midrash* teaches us about the importance of building a collaborative community. Each individual plays an important role in the functioning of the community and the fulfillment of its holy work. The harried Israelites would have left without Joseph's bones, had not Moses remembered the oath. Moses would have wandered all over Egypt searching for the bones, had not Serach bat Asher merited to live all those years with the knowledge of Joseph's burial. We would all still be slaves in Egypt, had not Joseph's bones responded to Moses' call and floated to the surface, delaying our exodus no longer. Remove any one of those pieces from the narrative, and the enterprise of redemption crumbles like a stale piece of *shmurah* matzah.

Today, we celebrate the work of our collaborative community with Volunteer Shabbat. Staff and clergy alone cannot successfully lead this community in all its sacred endeavors and worthy pursuits. We need all of you, our volunteers, the Serach bat Ashers of this community. Like Serach, many of you bring to the table your skills, your knowledge, your wisdom, your enthusiasm, and your passion. Like Serach, there are spans of time when your contribution may not be apparent to all, but that does not in any way suggest that your contribution is not critical to the functioning of this community. On this Volunteer Shabbat, we say thank you. Thank you for stepping forward when called upon to do so. Thank you for giving your time and resources. Thank you for volunteering to be a part of our story as a collaborative community, working in partnership with one another to bring about our own modern day miracles. To all of our volunteers, here in Dweck Sanctuary and joining us online, thank you, and may you all, like Serach bat Asher, be blessed with a many fulfilling years of life.

Shabbat shalom and chag sameach.