



Vayechi: A Better Burial

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

And Joseph died at the age of one hundred ten years, and they embalmed him, and he was placed into the coffin in Egypt. (Genesis 50:26).

It was the end of an era. With the passing of Yosef, the story of the Patriarchs comes to a close and the era of the Jewish people begins.

The *Shach* (Rav Shabtai ben Meir HaKohen, 1621-1662) asks why the Torah would choose to close the book of Bereishis on such a sad note. Tosafos quotes a principle of "*Misaymim B'Tov, we try to conclude on a positive/good note.*" Why not end with something more upbeat and optimistic? The *Shach* explains that Yaakov instructed that Yosef was to be buried in Egypt and not taken immediately to the Land of Israel. Yaakov said to Yosef, "*You need to protect the Children of Israel ... you need to be source of inspiration and kindness all the days of their servitude, and you need to accompany them as they make the journey through the desert to the promised land.*" Knowing that Yosef was with them gave our ancestors hope during the dark years of slavery. Remembering Yosef's kindness to his brothers gave us the ability to be kind to one another during the years of brutality. And having Yosef's casket with us as we travelled through the desert reminded us that we are part of a beautiful, Divine vision. We are a people of destiny.

I believe that there are two profound lessons which emerge from this idea. We learn that sometimes, the most meaningful thing you can do for someone is to be present. When we encounter a friend or acquaintance who is undergoing a difficult time, we often think we need to come up with something to say or some theological profundity which is going to suddenly remove all of the pain and hurt, when in reality, all we really need to do is be present. When my friend or family member knows that I am here, I am by their side, and I'm not going anywhere, that in and of itself provides nechama. The only thing worse than suffering – is suffering alone. Yosef didn't do anything to ease the pain of his children and descendants – he just remained present. The second lesson is a bit more complex. We learn from this last verse that at times we must be willing to sacrifice for the good of the other. Yosef deserved to be buried in the land of his birth. Yosef, the young man who was stolen from his homeland, had every right to be placed in its holy dirt. Yet, Yaakov tells him – *your people need you*. They need you in Egypt. And when your people need you, you must stand ready to answer the call even if it means sacrificing the very things which are important to you. Yosef, you will make it to the Land of Israel in a few hundred years, but right now, your place in death, as it was in life, is in Egypt. This is what it means to be part of a nation. This is what it means to be part of something bigger than yourself. I must be willing to sacrifice for the benefit of my people. Yosef gave up burial in the land of his forefathers for his beloved brothers and sisters.

Sefer Bereishis does end on a high note. For these final lessons of *Sefer Bereishis* are what allow us to transition from the book of individuals to the book of the nation. It is only if we are present and willing to sacrifice for one another that we can be a holy, beautiful, and unified nation.