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On occasion I have talked with congregants about their future funerals. It doesn't happen too often, since we typically avoid thinking about such things. In addition to the discomfort discussing our own deaths, it can be awkward to discuss its details with others. Nevertheless, whenever someone asks for that kind of a meeting, I feel that it is meaningful and important. Too often families find themselves dealing with decisions surrounding death without the input of the person most directly affected. Letting someone know what we do and don't want to happen after our passing can be a great blessing when that time comes.

When our patriarch Jacob was approaching death, he asked his son Joseph to make him a promise. They were both living in Egypt at that time, and Jacob made Joseph swear to him that he would be buried in the family plot in the land of Canaan. This was not a thing done easily. A journey from Egypt to Canaan to bury Jacob might have involved a great number of people, given the number of children he had; the Torah calls them "a very large troop." There was also the issue of the absence of Joseph from his duties in Pharaoh's court. His obligations to Egypt would have to give way for a time to his personal needs. Joseph made a special plea to Pharaoh, who gave permission for him to fulfill his oath to his father. Jacob was buried in Canaan.

As Joseph's example shows us, we should make every effort to fulfill the wishes of the dead when arranging for their burial. If they have expressed a preference for where they should be interred, who should speak at the funeral (and who should not), or for any other aspect of dealing with their deaths, we should accommodate those requests as best we can. I use the language of 'make every effort' and 'as best we can' because we know that promising the dying that we will do something is the right thing to do, but that carrying out those promises is not always possible. Providing words of comfort for those close to death is an important mitzvah, but after a death has occurred we must also take into account the needs of the living. In every circumstance, our actions must be guided by the love and respect we hold for both the living and the dead. On balance, Joseph did the right thing in fulfilling his vow to Jacob, but each of us can only know what is right based on our own circumstances. The best way to make sure our wishes will be followed is to make them known when we can still do so, and to ask only for those things we can reasonably expect to happen. 'To love is to bury,' an old song says, and, I would add, to bury is to love.

Shabbat shalom