

## Parshas Vayechi

Towards the end of our פרשה, after the death of יעקב, יוסף instructs the רפאים - physicians – to embalm יעקב, his father. The honorific handling of יעקב that follows is described in detail in the תרגום יונתן, who describes the placement of יעקב on a bed of bejewelled ivory, followed by application of spices and wine to make fragrant conditions for the מת, the deceased. The תרגום יונתן cites several sources (e.g. 51b; 48a) for the details.

offers various explanations for יוסף's actions, including his desire to honour his father according to local custom. He also suggests that it was to avoid misconstruction. Were יוסף to refrain from having יעקב embalmed, it might be thought that the reason was because he had not really died. Alternatively, - presumably protected by יעקב-הקב"ה's body would remain miraculously preserved, in which case the Egyptians would worship יעקב (as indeed happened with mummified Pharaohs) and refuse to let him be taken to מערת כפלה for burial.

However, the whole notion of יוסף ordering that יעקב be embalmed is problematic. It is well known that the ancient Egyptians were obsessed with death; they believed in an afterlife that involved incarnation within the life-time body, hence the importance of its preservation. This technique was elaborate, protracted (about 40 days' work) and expensive, performed by specialist embalmers. In practice though, as described by Herodotus, there was extensive disruption of the body. So from the Jewish perspective, the process as just described would be prohibited by the הלכה as המת, a disfigurement of the deceased.

The רבי [A מחלקת between] asks: Why did יוסף die before his brothers? (100:4) בראשית רבה and the רבנן. רבי says because he had his father embalmed. הקב"ה said to him – 'am I not able to protect my righteous ones?' and cites a play on תולעת יעקב [Fear not O worm of Jacob (XLI; 14)] אל תירא תולעת יעקב את יעקב (O worm do not/ you will not see יעקב) The רבנן offer an alternative explanation, understanding the embalming to be implicit in יעקב's wishes. Clearly, though, the מדרש seems to be focused on apparent lack of faith in יוסף's part, rather than on the issue of המת.

gives many insights into this episode; firstly the very fact that יוסף had a team of doctors in his service reflected on יוסף's greatness. Although מלבים notes that the procedure allowed the mummies to endure for thousands of years, however the question remained as to how יוסף could act thus with the holy body of his father. מלבים explores the traditional Jewish notion that burial – קבורה - serves a beneficial purpose, accelerating the return of the soul to its Source. He elaborates on the complex alchemical-spiritual relationship between elements of the soul and the body, the persistent connection of these after physical death contributing to the generation of טומאה. יעקב was supremely righteous

and spiritually refined such that a) his נשמה could return to its Source even before קבורה of his physical remains, and b) the latter would not be a source of טומאה at all. Then the מלבים addresses the embalming of יעקב: מלבים delineates the Egyptian perspective - the soul becomes a *material* substance, at one with the body, with, therefore, no use for burial as a mechanism of liberating it. Finally מלבים sees a parallel between the 40 days required to produce a 'new' creature - the mummified body - and the 40 days for יצירת הולד in the Rabbinic tradition. The total of 70 days mentioned in verse 3 is the 40 days of חנטה plus 30 days' mourning.

Rav SR Hirsch in his commentary on the חומש makes some similar points. To the Egyptians, the body was embalmed so that *its* individuality should persist. The soul did not preserve its individuality; it wandered from body to body. The Egyptians tried to protect the body from all possible wandering or change, to the extent of embalming it and building colossal pyramids in which the dead could dwell, with numerous possessions. The contrasting Jewish belief is in an eternal personal existence of the soul, while the body should, in a timely fashion, be brought in closest contact possible to the dissolving earth. יוסף may only have made a concession to the Egyptian customs, because they would have considered omission of it as showing a great lack of piety; a further aim was to avoid the Egyptians making an ע"ז out of his body.

Rav Shimon Schwab in בית השואבה מעין בית חונטים offers a fascinating solution to our problem, contrasting רופאים with חונטים. Rav Schwab asks why יוסף commanded the רופאים to embalm יעקב and not the professional embalmers. In his view there are two types of embalming. That of the professional embalmers was invasive and would indeed be אסור as מת. However, there was also an external technique, that was practised by a specialist group of physicians, expert in the placing of spices and substances externally and without any damage to יעקב's body (R' Schwab cites תשובות of the סופר (336 י"ד) in the name of זוהר). However, יוסף was keen to keep it secret that he had not had the process performed according to the usual Egyptian protocols. So his physicians still kept everyone waiting up to 40 days even though they had completed their task earlier. [The רופאים vs תרגום יונתן contrast might also be implicit in the תרגומים: אונקלוס: תרגום יונתן vs למחנט ית אבוהי: אונקלוס. לבסמא ית אבוהי: s'. There are similar approaches in ר' בחיי חומש and in the פננת פננת, based on נזיר (51b)].

don't appear much in תנ"ך and when they do, it is generally not in a good light; maybe their actions in this context redeem our ancient profession!