

Parashat Vayechi

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FROM EXILE TO REDEMPTION

- What is the significance of Jacob's burial in the Land of Israel?
- Why does Joseph prophesize about the nation's future redemption from Egypt before they have been enslaved?
- Why does Joseph bear the news of the redemption?
- Why doesn't Joseph command the people to bury him in Israel now, instead of commanding them to bring his bones with them when they leave Egypt?

A. The Death of Jacob and the Death of Joseph

INTRODUCTION

Parashat Vayechi concludes the book of Genesis, which depicts the lives of the Patriarchs and leads into the book of Exodus, which tells the story of a nation – “the nation of Israel,”¹ its exile and redemption.

Even though the *parasha* begins with the words, “And Jacob lived [*vayechi Ya'akov*]” (thus giving the *parasha* its name, *Vayechi*), it describes Jacob's

¹ The children of Israel are first defined as a nation by Pharaoh: “For the nation of the children of Israel are many and mightier...” (Ex. 1:9).

death, not his life. Joseph's death is also related at the end of the *parasha*.² The *parasha* begins with a description of Jacob's preparations for his death: he commands Joseph to bury him in Canaan (Gen. 47:29-31); he grants Ephraim and Menashe a special status, making them worthy of receiving a portion of land in Israel (Gen. 48:1-6); he blesses all of his sons (Gen. 49:1-28) and commands them to bury him in the Cave of Machpela (Gen. 49:29-32). Subsequently, the Torah describes Jacob's death (Gen. 49:33), the mourning for him (Gen. 50:1-3) and the journey to bury him (Gen. 50:4-13). Following Jacob's death, a conversation takes place between Joseph and his brothers which dispels tensions between them (Gen. 50:14-21). The *parasha* concludes with Joseph's speech to his brothers and his subsequent death (Gen. 50:24-25).

COMPARING JACOB'S AND JOSEPH'S DEATHS

A comparison of Jacob and Joseph's deaths highlights several similarities:³

Settling in Egypt Jacob: And Israel settled in the land of Egypt. (Gen. 47:27)

Joseph: And Joseph settled in Egypt, he and his father's house. (Gen. 50:22)

² Similar to *Parashat Chayei Sarah* ["The life of Sarah"], which actually describes Sarah's death and burial.
³ In Jacob's narrative, the descriptions are far more detailed. However, there are a number of central themes that appear in both narratives.

Sum of the Years of their Lives Jacob: And Jacob's years of his life were one hundred and forty seven. (Gen. 47:28)

Joseph: And Joseph lived one hundred and ten years. (Gen. 50:22)

Mention of their Future Return to Israel Jacob: And Israel said to **Joseph**, "Behold, I am dying, and God will be with you and return you to the land of your forefathers." (Gen. 48:21)

Joseph: And Joseph said to **his brothers**, "I am dying, and God will surely come to your aid and bring you up from this land, to the land that He promised to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob."⁴ (Gen. 50:24)

Their Will Jacob: "Put your **hand** under my thigh, and do kindness and truth with me; please, do not **bury me** in Egypt..." And he said, "Swear to me," and he swore to him. (Gen. 47:29, 31)

Joseph: And Joseph made the children of Israel swear, saying... "And you shall bring my bones up from this." (Gen. 50:25)

Jacob: "And you shall carry me from Egypt **and bury me** in their burial place."⁵ (Gen. 47:30)

Jacob: "**Bury** me with my forefathers, in the cave

⁴ Note the clear parallels here between Jacob and Joseph's speeches.

⁵ The command to be buried in the Land of Israel appears in both of their speeches, but Jacob mentions it twice: once to Joseph and again to all of his sons. The description of Jacob's burial parallels this repetition: once, Joseph is described as carrying out his father's command; later, all of the brothers are mentioned taking part in the burial.

which is in the field of Ephron the Hittite.”
(Gen. 49:29)

Death Jacob: And he gathered his feet into the bed and he died and was gathered to his people. (Gen.49:33)

Joseph: And Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years. (Gen. 50:26)

Embalming Jacob: And the physicians embalmed Israel.
(Gen. 50:2)

Joseph: And they embalmed him. (Gen. 50:26)

Burial Jacob: And Joseph went up to bury his father,
And his sons carried him... and they buried him in the cave of the field of Machpela. (Gen. 50:7, 13)

Joseph: And he was put into a coffin in Egypt. (Gen. 50:26)

Burial in the Land of Israel and the Promise for Redemption Jacob and Joseph both prophesize about their descendants’ return to the Land of Israel and both request to be buried there. However, there are some obvious differences between them:

A. Jacob does not tell all of his sons about the future redemption and return to the Land of Israel – he tells only Joseph. Joseph only reveals this to his brothers just prior to his death.

B. Jacob is brought to Israel for burial immediately after his death, while Joseph is placed in a coffin in Egypt for the time being.

This comparison between Jacob and Joseph raises a number of questions:

Why is Joseph placed in a coffin in Egypt instead of being buried in the Land of Israel?

Why doesn’t Joseph command his brothers to bury him in the Land of Israel immediately after his death, as Jacob did? Why does he command them to take his bones only when “God will surely come to your aid”?

Why is Joseph the one to notify his brothers of the redemption? Why doesn’t Jacob himself do so?

We shall discuss all of these questions below.

B. When does the Exile Begin?

THE BEGINNING OF THE EXILE – BEFORE THE ENSLAVEMENT

Joseph’s words raise another question: why does he make his will contingent on the fulfillment of the promise that “God will surely come to your aid”? The brothers were close relatives of the viceroy of Egypt – they were presumably free to leave. Was Joseph concerned that the circumstances would change after his death?⁶

⁶ The commentators, puzzled by Joseph’s statement, offer a number of interpretations. Some explain, somewhat inelegantly, that Joseph was not referring to his family’s presence in Egypt, but to their livelihood. *HaEmek Davar* comments:

It turns out that the brothers did not enjoy total freedom even during Joseph's lifetime. For example, when Jacob's children wished to bury him in Canaan, they had to ask Pharaoh for permission. Even Joseph, the king's second-in-command, had to ask for permission to bury his father – and he does not even dare ask Pharaoh directly, addressing instead the “house of Pharaoh”:⁷

And Joseph spoke to the house of Pharaoh, saying, “If I have found favor in your eyes, please

וַיִּדְבֹר יוֹסֵף אֶל בֵּית פַּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר: אִם נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ

“אנכי מת ואלהים פקד יפקד אתכם” – נחמם שלא ידאגו במותו על פרנסה. ומי יכלכלם אחריו. ומשום הכי אמר שהקב"ה יפקוד אותם בימי הגלות ויהיו נוכרים לפרנסם. וגם לבסוף והעלה וגו':

“I am dying, and God will surely come to your aid” – he comforted them that they should not worry about their livelihood or who would support them after his death. And for this reason he said that God would come to their aid during the exile and He would remember them and support them. And in the end “[He] will bring you up, etc.” (*HaEmek Davar* on Gen. 50:24)

7 This too puzzled the commentators, who suggest a number of explanations. Seforno explains that Joseph did not address Pharaoh directly because he was in mourning and “one does not come before the king dressed in sackcloth.”

Hizkuni also attempts to explain Joseph's restrictions in leaving Egypt:

בשביל שהוא היה המביא והמוציא כדכתיב: “בלעדך לא ירים איש את ידו וגו'”, חשב שיקשה בעיני פרעה איך יעזוב הוא את הארץ.

For he was in charge of entry to and departure from Egypt, as it is written: “Without your consent no man shall raise his hand, etc.” He thought that it would be difficult for Pharaoh [to accept] his leaving Egypt. (*Hizkuni* on Gen. 50:4)

In this week's lesson, we will suggest an additional answer to this question.

speaking to Pharaoh, saying: ‘My father has made me swear, saying: “Behold, I am dying; in the grave that I have dug for myself in Canaan, there you shall bury me,” and now, please allow me to go up and bury my father and return.’” And Pharaoh said, “Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear.” (Gen. 50:4-6)

דָּבָרוּ נָא בְּאָזְנֵי פַרְעֹה לֵאמֹר: אָבִי הִשְׁבִּיעַנִי לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי מֵת בְּקִבְרֵי אֲשֶׁר פָּרִיתִי לִי בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן שָׁמָּה תִקְבְּרֵנִי וְעַתָּה אֲעֹלָה נָא וְאֶקְבְּרָה אֶת אָבִי וְאָשׁוּבָה: וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה עֲלֶה וּקְבֹר אֶת אָבִיךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר הִשְׁבִּיעַךָ. (פרק נ', ד-ו)

Although Pharaoh agrees immediately, the fact that Joseph asks at all is puzzling: does the second-in-command need to ask the king's permission to leave the country to bury his father where he asked to be buried?⁸

Leaving the Children and the Livestock

In addition, when Jacob's descendants leave to bury him, the text states: “Only their children and sheep and cattle they left in the land of Goshen”⁹ (Gen. 50:8).

8 According to Rashi's interpretation (see Rashi on Gen. 15:13), the period of “four hundred years” being strangers in a “land that is not their own,” about which Abraham prophesized at the Covenant between the Parts, began at Isaac's birth. It included the years that Isaac lived in Gerar and Jacob lived in Egypt. The enslavement began during the lifetimes of the Patriarchs and not after Joseph's death. Indeed, as we shall see, elements of enslavement were present even prior to Joseph's death.

9 A number of commentators were baffled by this statement, including *Mas'et HaMelech*:

הדברים תמוהים, וכי רבותא הוא שאין צאן ובקר הולכים להלוית המת, ומה היה צריך הכתוב להשמיענו שצאנם עזבו בארץ גושן, ואולי יש לומר דהכוונה היא שהרועים נשארו בגושן לשמור צאנם, וצ"ע.

This verse parallels Pharaoh's demand of the nation a few generations later:

And Moses and Aaron were returned to Pharaoh, and he said to them, "Go and serve the Lord, your God; but which ones are to go?" And Moses said, "We shall go with our young and our old, **with our sons and our daughters, with our sheep and our cattle we shall go**, for it is a festival of the Lord for us." And he said to them, "Indeed, let the Lord be with you as I send you **and your children!** Behold, there is evil in your intentions. It shall not be so; **the men shall go** and serve the Lord, for that was your request." And he drove them out of Pharaoh's presence. (Ex. 10:8-11)

ויישוב את משה ואת אהרן אל פרעה ויאמרו אליהם לכו עבדו את ה' א-לֹהֵיכֶם מי וְמִי הַהֲלֹכִים: ויאמר משה בְּנֵעֲרֵינוּ וּבְקִנְיָנוּ גֵלְךָ בְּבָנֵינוּ וּבְבָנוֹתֵנוּ בְּעֲאֲנָנוּ וּבְבָקָרֵנוּ גֵלְךָ כִּי חַג ה' לָנוּ: ויאמר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם יְהִי כֵן ה' עִמָּכֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלַּח אֶתְכֶם וְאֵת טַפְּכֶם רְאוּ כִּי רָעָה נָגַד פְּנֵיכֶם: לֹא כֵן לָכוּ נָא הַגְּבִרִים וְעַבְדוּ אֶת ה' כִּי אֲתֶה אִתְּם מִבְּקִשֵׁי וַיִּגְרַשׁ אֹתָם מֵאֶת פְּנֵי פֶרְעֹה. (שמות י', ח-יא)

And once again, during the plague of darkness:

These words are puzzling, for is it remarkable that the cattle and sheep would not go to accompany the dead? Why did the text need to tell us that they left their livestock in Goshen? Perhaps one could say that this indicates that the shepherds stayed in Goshen to watch over their flocks, and this requires further study. (*Mas'et HaMelech* on Gen. 50:8)

See also the continuation of his commentary. His questions will be answered in this lesson.

And Pharaoh called for Moses and said, "Go and serve the Lord; **only your sheep and cattle shall remain**, your children shall go with you." (Ex. 10:24)

ויקרא פרעה אל משה ויאמר לכו עבדו את ה' רק צֹאנְכֶם וּבְקָרְכֶם יֵצֵג גַּם טַפְּכֶם יִלְךָ עִמָּכֶם: (שם, כד)

While the nation is enslaved in Egypt, Pharaoh does not allow them to leave with their children and livestock. He demands that they be left as "hostages" to ensure the nation's return to Egypt. Even when Jacob's children leave to bury him in Canaan, they leave their children and livestock, which serves as a guarantee for their return. It seems that the exile in Egypt has already begun. Even during Joseph's lifetime, the people were to a certain extent enslaved in Egypt.

Voluntary Exile

However, there is an obvious difference between the two incidents: in the book of Exodus, Pharaoh is the one to insist that only the men leave, while Moses demands that everyone be allowed to leave. In contrast, in our *parasha* when Jacob is to be buried, the brothers leave their children and livestock in Egypt of their own free will. No one forces them to do so; they apparently decided on this arrangement because they felt that Goshen was their home and planned to return there. In other words – the forced servitude had not yet begun, but Jacob's children had already established themselves in Egypt and were therefore not interested in returning to Israel. The spiritual slavery had already begun, which indicates that this is the beginning of the exile in Egypt.

NEWS OF THE REDEMPTION –
 “GOD WILL SURELY COME TO YOUR AID”

Joseph
 Foresees
 the Exile

Joseph is the “master of dreams.” While his brothers called him this derisively (Gen 37:19), it nonetheless reflects an important quality of Joseph’s: he is a man with a vision. He knows how to interpret reality and sense what will happen.¹⁰ Joseph observes his family settling in Egypt, and perhaps also notices the Egyptians’ treatment of them as foreigners. He begins to recognize the first signs of slavery and realizes that this is the start of a long exile which will not end easily.

In light of this, Joseph understands that Divine intervention will be necessary to end the exile, and therefore says to his brothers: “God will surely come to your aid.” Joseph foresees the exile, but even before it has begun he also sees the future redemption. Before his death, he leaves the people with this vision.

Jacob’s
 Prophecy
 of Exile

However, Joseph was not the first to foresee the exile and subsequent redemption. Jacob revealed this by saying, “And God will be with you and return you to the land of your forefathers.” (Gen. 48:21).

10 Clearly, this was only possible with God’s help – God shows him the dreams and their interpretations – but Joseph has a special ability to absorb these messages and act accordingly. In this way, he foresaw that his family would be financially dependent on him and that he would lead the family in this area. In addition, he was able to interpret the dreams of the head butler and head baker, and ultimately even the dreams of Pharaoh himself, notifying him of the imminent famine and suggesting means of dealing with it.

Jacob had received this prophecy years earlier,¹¹ as he was traveling to Egypt to meet Joseph:

And God said to Israel in visions of the night, and He said, “Jacob,” and Jacob said, “Here I am.” And He said, “I am the Lord, God of your father; do not fear going down to Egypt, for I shall make you into a great nation there. I shall go down with you to Egypt, and I shall also surely bring you up, and Joseph shall place his hand upon your eyes.”¹² (Gen. 46:2-4)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמַרְאֵת הַלַּיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִּי וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי הָאֵל אֵל לְהִי אָבִיךָ אֵל תִּירָא מִרְדָּה מִצְרַיִם כִּי לְגוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשִׁימְךָ שָׁם: אֲנֹכִי אֵרֵד עִמָּךְ מִצְרַיִם וְאֲנֹכִי אֵעֲלֶיךָ גַם עֹלָה וַיֹּסֶף יוֹסֵף יָדוֹ עַל עֵינָיו. (פָּרָק מ"ו, ב-ד)

11 Actually, it is possible that Jacob was aware of the future redemption even earlier, from the prophecy that was given to Abraham at the Covenant between the Parts:

יָדַע תְּדַע כִּי גֵר יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וַעֲבָדוּם וַעֲנִי אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה: וְגַם אֶת הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דָן אֲנֹכִי וְאַחֲרָי כִּן יֵצְאוּ בִּרְכֻשׁ גָּדוֹל.
 Know with certainty that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not their own, and they shall be enslaved and tortured for four hundred years. And the nation which enslaves them, too, I shall judge, and afterward they shall leave with great possessions.” (Gen. 15:13-14)

Rashi explains Jacob’s words to Joseph as follows:

“הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי מוֹת” – וַיּוֹדַע אֲנִי שְׂאֵחָרֵי מוֹתִי יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהִים עִמָּכֶם וְהִשִּׁיב אֶתְכֶם אֶל אֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם לְאַחַר ד’ מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר לְאַבְרָהָם.
 “Behold, I am dying” – and I know that after my death God will be with you and return you to the land of your forefathers after 400 years, as was said to Abraham. (Rashi on Gen. 48:21)

12 Rashi, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra interpret “I shall also surely bring you up” as a promise regarding Jacob’s burial in the Land of Israel, which was fulfilled by Joseph immediately after Jacob’s death (this would also explain its proximity to

Before his death, Jacob informs Joseph of the future redemption and Joseph passes this information to his brothers.

“God will surely come to your aid”

Many years later, when Moses is sent to inform the nation of Israel of the beginning of the redemption, he is commanded to tell them the following:

The Lord, God of your forefathers, appeared to me – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – saying, “I have surely come to your aid regarding what has been done to you in Egypt.” (Ex. 3:16)

ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם נִרְאָה אֵלַי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר פִּקֹּד פְּקֹדֵתַי אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת הַעֲשׂוּי לְכֶם בְּמִצְרָיִם. (שמות ג', טז)

To convince the elders of the nation to listen to him, Moses uses the same phrase, “I have surely come to your aid,” as used by Joseph when speaking to his brothers: “I am dying, and God will surely come to

the phrase, “And Joseph shall place his hand upon your eyes.”) However, this statement can also be understood as referring to the exodus from Egypt, as described in *Shemot Rabba*:

“וארד להצילו מיד מצרים” וגו'. אמר הקב"ה למשה: אני אמרתי ליעקב אביהם “אנכי ארד עמך מצרימה ואנכי אעלה” וגו', ועתה ירדתי לכאן להעלות בניו כמו שאמרתי ליעקב אביהו.

“And I shall go down to save [the nation] from the hand of Egypt, etc.” – God said to Moses: I said to their forefather Jacob, “I shall go down with you to Egypt, and I shall also surely bring you up, etc.” and now I have come down here to bring his children up, as I said to their forefather Jacob. (*Shemot Rabba* 3:3)

According to the *midrash*, which refers to the future redemption from Egypt, God’s statement to Jacob that “Joseph shall place his hand upon your eyes” hints to Joseph’s continued, and even posthumous, participation in the process of redemption.

your aid and bring you up from this land” (Gen. 50:24). Joseph planted the hope for redemption in the hearts of the people by repeating the phrase “will surely come to your aid” twice; this hope echoed within them during their slavery in Egypt. Joseph’s words were passed down from father to son throughout the years of horrific slavery; they kept hope alive that one day, God would come to their aid and they would merit redemption.¹³

13 This idea is expressed in the following *midrash*:

אמר להם (משה לזקנים): כך אמר הקב"ה “פקוד פקדתי אתכם”; סימן היה לישראל, כל גואל שיבא בסימן הזה “פקוד פקדתי, הם יודעים שהוא גואל של אמת. שכן אמר להם יוסף, “ואלהים פקוד יפקוד אתכם” (בראשית נ', כד), כיון שהזכיר להם “פקוד יפקוד” מיד “ויאמן העם” (שמות ד', לא).

He said to them (Moses to the elders): Thus said God: “I have surely come to your aid”; this was a sign to the nation of Israel. Anyone who came to redeem them with this sign: “surely come to your aid,” they knew that he had truly come to redeem them, for Joseph had said to them, “And God will surely come to your aid” (Gen. 50:24). When he said “surely come to your aid,” immediately “the nation believed him” (Ex. 4:31). (*Tanhuma* [Buber] *Shemot* 21)

Rashi, following this *midrash*, comments:

“ישמעו לקולך” – מאליהם, מכיוון שתאמר להם לשון זה ישמעו לקולך, שכבר סימן זה מסור בידם מיעקב ומיוסף שבלשון זה הם נגאלים יעקב אמר (בראשית נ', כב): “ואלהים פקוד יפקוד אתכם”, יוסף אמר להם (שם, כה) “פקוד יפקוד אלהים אתכם”.

“And they will listen to your voice” – inevitably. Because you say this phrase to them they will listen to you, for a sign has been passed down to them from Jacob and Joseph that they will be redeemed with these words. Jacob said: “And God will surely come to your aid” (Gen. 50:24); Joseph said to them: “God will surely come to your aid” (Gen. 50:25). (Rashi on Ex. 3:18)

Rashi’s explanation is somewhat problematic, as the phrase “will surely come to your aid” appears twice in Joseph’s speech and is not used by Jacob at all. Jacob does prophesize

C. The Redemption and the Bones of Joseph

“AND YOU SHALL BRING MY BONES UP”

Why is Joseph the One to Bring the News of the Redemption?

Why is it that Jacob, the first to envision the exile and subsequent redemption, does not tell his sons of this vision himself? Why did he leave this specifically to Joseph? Perhaps Jacob passed away at a point when his family was not completely settled in Egypt, and they were not in a position to hear and accept such a prophecy. Jacob told Joseph alone, and as Joseph lay dying he decided that it was the proper time to reveal this information to his brothers. Yet, there might be a more fundamental reason that specifically Joseph's words should accompany the nation of Israel throughout their exile in Egypt. It is Joseph's words that echo in the nation's memory during the long

regarding the redemption from Egypt, but in different words:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל יוֹסֵף הִנֵּה אֲנִי מוֹת וְהָיָה אֱלֹהִים עִמָּכֶם וְהָשִׁיב אֶתְכֶם אֶל אֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם.

And Israel said to Joseph, “Behold, I am dying, and God will be with you and return you to the land of your forefathers.” (Gen. 48:21)

Rashi's explanation seems to be based on the *midrash* (*Shemot Rabba* 5:13), according to which the sign of redemption was passed down from Jacob, throughout the generations, until the time of Moses. In accordance with this *midrash*, Rashi explains that of the two appearances of the phrase “will surely come to your aid” in *Parashat Vayechi*, the first was said by Jacob, and the second by Joseph – despite the fact that according to the simple understanding of the text, both were said by Joseph. Joseph may have actually spoken the words “will surely come to your aid,” but the concept of the future exile and redemption was first expressed by Jacob.

and difficult years of exile, and it is his words that represent the redemption.

Taking Joseph's Bones at the Time of Redemption

This point is related to the fact that Joseph is not initially buried in the Land of Israel, as was Jacob; his body is placed in a coffin in Egypt. Had he wanted to, he could have arranged for Pharaoh's permission to be buried in Canaan. But Joseph chose to command his brothers to bring his bones with them during the exodus from Egypt. When the nation of Israel leaves Egypt, the Torah emphasizes that Moses fulfilled Joseph's request and took his bones with them:

And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had surely made the children of Israel swear, saying, “God will surely come to your aid, and you shall bring my bones up from this.” (Ex. 13:19)

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת עֲצָמוֹת יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ כִּי הִשְׁבַּע הַשְּׂבִיעַ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פִּקֹּד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם וְהֵעֲלִיתֶם אֶת עֲצָמוֹתַי מִזֶּה אִתְּכֶם. (שמות י"ג, יט)

The Torah does not mention the bodies of the rest of the brothers, although presumably they were brought up from Egypt as well. There seems to be some special significance that specifically Joseph's body was taken. What is it?

When Joseph commands his brothers to take his body, he ties his request to the future redemption: “God will surely come to your aid... and you shall bring my bones up from this” (Gen. 50:24-25). Apparently, **bringing up Joseph's bones is closely linked to the promised Divine aid**, as illustrated by the following

midrash:

[The time of] Israel's redemption had come... And Moses circled the city and toiled for three days and three nights to find Joseph's coffin, for they could not leave Egypt without Joseph. Why? Because he had made them swear in an oath before his death, as it says: "And Joseph made the children of Israel swear, saying, etc." And when he had become exhausted from the search, a noble woman¹⁴ met him... She said, "Come with me and I will show you where it is," and she led him to the river. She said, "In this place, the magicians and wizards made a coffin of 500 talents, and they threw it into the river. They said to Pharaoh: 'Do you desire that this nation shall never leave here? If they do not find Joseph's bones - they will never be able to leave.'" Immediately Moses

הגיע גאולתן של ישראל... ומשה היה מסבב את העיר ויגע שלשה ימים ושלשה לילות למצוא ארונו של יוסף שלא היו יכולים לצאת ממצרים חוץ מיוסף. למה? שכך נשבע להן בשבועה לפני מותו שנאמר: "וישבע יוסף את בני ישראל לאמר וגו'". משנתייגע הרבה פגעה בו סגולה... אמרה לו בא עמי ואראך היכן הוא, הוליכה אותו לנחל אמרה לו במקום הזה עשו ארון שלת"ק ככרים והשליכוהו בתוך הנחל החרטומים והאשפים. וכן אמרו לפרעה ירצונך שלא תצא אומה זו מכאן לעולם? העצמות של יוסף, אם לא ימצאו אותן - עד עולם אינם יכולים לצאת. מיד עמד משה על שפת הנחל ואמר: יוסף יוסף אתה

¹⁴ In other *midrashim*, this woman is identified as Serach, the daughter of Asher.

stood at the banks of the river and said, "Joseph, Joseph, you know that you swore to Israel that 'God will surely come to your aid'! Give honor to the God of Israel and do not delay the redemption of the nation of Israel! ... Ask your Creator for mercy and rise from the depths." Immediately Joseph's coffin began to bubble and rise from the depths as a single reed. He took it and put it on his shoulders... (*Devarim Rabba* 11:7)

ידעת היאך נשבעת לישראל "פקוד יפקוד א-ללהים אתכם!" תן כבוד לא-ללהי ישראל ואל תעכב גאולתן של ישראל! ...בקש רחמים לפני בוראך ועלה מן התהומות, מיד התחיל ארונו של יוסף מפעפע ועולה מן התהומות כקנה אחד. לקח אותו ושם אותו על כתפו... (דברים רבה י"א, ז)

**Joseph's Burial -
After they have
Settled in the
Land**

Joseph's bones accompany the nation as they travel in the wilderness,¹⁵ and later when they conquer and divide the Land of Israel. Only later, following Joshua's death, Joseph's burial is mentioned:

And Joseph's bones, which the nation of Israel had brought up from Egypt, they buried in Shechem, in the portion of the field that Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor, father of Shechem, for one hundred

ואת עצמות יוסף אשר העלו בני ישראל ממצרים קברו בשכם בחלקת השדה אשר קנה יעקב מאת בני חמור אבי שכם

¹⁵ See *Mechilta DeRabbi Yishmael mesechta "Vayehi" Beshalach*, s.v. "Vayikach Moshe":

שהיה מהלך ארונו של יוסף עם ארון חי העולמים...
For the coffin [*aron*] of Joseph accompanied the ark [*aron*] of the Living of Ages.

pieces of silver, and this became
 a possession for the descendants
 of Joseph.¹⁶ (Josh. 24:32)

בַּמָּאָה קָשִׁיטָה וַיְהִי
 לְבָנֵי יוֹסֵף לְנַחֲלָה.
 (יהושע כ"ד, לב)

Joseph had not commanded his brothers to bury him in a particular place; he only asked them to bring his bones up “from this” (the land of Egypt) to the land that God had sworn to give their forefathers and their descendants (Gen. 50:24). Why did the nation delay Joseph’s burial for so long after entering the Land of Israel? Why didn’t they bury him immediately? Because they realized that Joseph’s request to bring his bones with them was an expression of his desire to accompany them throughout their journey until they reached safety and peace.

Rectifying the Sale of Joseph

Another question: why was Joseph buried specifically in Shechem? This can be understood as a rectification of the sale of Joseph:

Joseph was sold by his brothers in Shechem – an act which caused the entire exile in Egypt. Liberation from this exile requires rectification of the sin of

16 Interestingly, in his speech to Joseph, Jacob links between the future redemption and Shechem being given to Joseph:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל יוֹסֵף הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי מֵת וְהָיָה אֵילֹהִים עִמָּכֶם וְהִשִּׁיב אֶתְכֶם אֶל אֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם: וְאָנֹכִי נֹתְנִי לָךְ שָׂכָם אֶחָד עַל אֲחִיךָ אֲשֶׁר לָקַחְתִּי מִיַּד הָאֱמֹרִי בְּחֶרֶב־וּבִקְשָׁתִי.

And Israel said to Joseph, “Behold, I am dying, and God will be with you and return you to the land of your forefathers. And I shall give you one portion of land [*shechem*] more than your brothers, that which I took from the hands of the Amorites with my sword and bow.” (Gen. 48:21-22)

selling Joseph by Joseph’s brothers¹⁷ bringing his bones back with them to Shechem, where he was sold. The *midrash* states:

Thus said the Holy One, Blessed be He, to the tribes: You sold Joseph? Return his bones to their place. Another matter: Joseph said to them, “Swear to me that you shall return me to the place from which you stole me,” and so the nation of Israel did – “And Joseph’s bones, which the nation of Israel had brought up from Egypt, they buried in Shechem.”¹⁸ (*Bereshit Rabba* [Albeck] 85, s.v. “*Vayered Yehuda*”)¹⁹

17 The Sages state (see Rashi on Gen. 49:6) that the plot to kill Joseph was devised by Simeon and Levi, who were the extremists of the family and the eldest of Leah’s sons (aside from Reuben and Judah, who attempted to save Joseph), while the sons of the maidservants were Joseph’s “friends.” In Egypt, Joseph imprisons Simeon specifically, apparently deliberately. In this context it is interesting to note that Moses, who was from the descendants of Levi, is the one who goes to great lengths to bring Joseph’s bones to Israel – this may be seen as part of the rectification of the sale.

18 The descent to Egypt began with the dissension and division that led to the sale of Joseph. The return to Israel symbolizes unity: the brothers, represented by their children, are the ones ensuring that Joseph returns to Israel and is buried in Shechem. The site of their conflict becomes the foundation of their unity. Shechem’s fundamental role in the unity or disunity of the nation is also expressed later when the kingdom

According to this interpretation,²⁰ the exile in Egypt was a result of (or punishment for) the sale of Joseph.²¹ This explains why Joseph is the one chosen to bring the news of the redemption: Joseph, who suffered his brothers' cruel treatment and was sent by them to Egypt, is now asking them – *he* is asking, and is asking *them* specifically²² – to remember him and bring him

of Israel is split– a discussion beyond the scope of our lesson.
19 *Mechilta DeRabbi Yishmael* also states:

אמר להם יוסף: אבי ירד כאן לרצוננו, ואני העלתיו; אני ירדתי על כרחי, משביע אני עליכם ממקום שגנבתוני לשם תחזירוני, וכן עשו שנאמר "ואת עצמות יוסף אשר העלו בני ישראל ממצרים קברו בשכם בחלקת השדה אשר קנה יעקב מאת בני חמור אבי שכם במאה קשיטה ויהיו לבני יוסף לנחלה".

Joseph said to them: My father came down to here of his own volition, and I brought him back up; I was brought here against my will, and now, swear to me that you shall return me to the place from which you stole me." And so the nation of Israel did – "And Joseph's bones, which the nation of Israel had brought up from Egypt, they buried in Shechem, in the portion of the field that Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor, father of Shechem, for one hundred pieces of silver, and this became a possession for the descendants of Joseph" (Josh 24:32). (*Mechilta DeRabbi Yishmael, mesechta "Vayehi," Beshalach, s.v. "Vayikach Moshe"*)

20 Abarbanel suggests a similar interpretation in his commentary on *Parashat Lekh Lekha*. See also *Maharal, Gevurot Hashem*, ch. 9.

21 However, Abraham had already received a prophecy regarding this exile, at the Covenant between the Parts (Gen. 15:7-19). In light of this, it seems that the sale of Joseph was merely a means to bring about the nation's descent to Egypt. See Rashi on Gen. 37:14; Ramban on Gen. 37:15; *Maharal, Gevurot Hashem* ad loc.

22 See *Ba'al HaTurim's* commentary on Gen. 50:25:

וישבע יוסף את בני ישראל – ולא השביע לבניו אלא אמר להם בשכם לקחתם אותי ושמה תחזירוני.

"And Joseph made the children of Israel swear" – and he did not make his children swear; rather, he said to them: in Shechem you took me, and to there you shall return me.

back to his homeland. The brothers, who caused the exile by selling their brother, are now asked to aid the process of redemption by returning Joseph's coffin to Israel, just as the process of exile was aided by their sale of him.

JOSEPH AS THE INITIATOR OF EXILE AND REDEMPTION

Perhaps there is further significance to Joseph's accompanying the process of redemption from Egypt.

Hope
Intertwined
with the
Descent to
Exile

Joseph arrived in Egypt before his brothers and set the scene for their arrival (albeit unknowingly). Through this process, he caused them to come down to Egypt and made it possible for them to settle there – he was the one who gave them the land of Goshen and ensured that they established themselves there instead of returning to Canaan. However, Joseph is equally responsible for initiating the process of redemption as well: when he feels that the nation is beginning to settle in Egypt – even before they are enslaved – he prophesizes that "God will surely come to your aid," and commands them to take his bones with them when they are freed. In this way, he paves the way for the future redemption.

The book of Genesis does not end with the family's remaining in Egypt and the commencement of the exile. Rather, it concludes with two stories that

(*Ba'al HaTurim* on Gen. 50:25)

**Jacob's Burial –
Strengthening
the Connection
with the Land**

express the hope for redemption:

The first story is the nation's journey to Canaan to bury their father, Jacob. Jacob's burial in this land concludes the narrative of the Patriarchs, who were all buried in the Land of Israel. Their burial in the land is the basis for the nation's strong claim to the Land of Canaan. Although Jacob died in Egypt, he commands his sons to bury him in Canaan, thereby ensuring their deep connection to the land – their forefathers' homeland and burial place.²³

23 This interpretation answers Ramban's question regarding Jacob's need to command both Joseph and his brothers separately. Ramban himself answers:

אבל צוה לכולם עתה שיקברו אותו אל המערה כאשר השביע ליוסף, כי פחד אולי לא יתן פרעה רשות ליוסף לצאת מן הארץ שלא יתעכב בארצו, והלא תראה שהוצרך יוסף לחלות פני בית פרעה שיבקשו עליו מפרעה שילך.

But he commanded all of them now to bury him in the cave, as he made Joseph swear, for he feared that perhaps Pharaoh would not permit Joseph to leave the land [of Egypt], lest [Joseph] be delayed in his land [Canaan]; and was it not so? For Joseph needed to appeal to the house of Pharaoh to ask Pharaoh for permission to go.

However, according to the interpretation suggested above, Jacob's words to his sons are clearly more than a technical command – they are a profound and fundamental command that demonstrate the connection between the House of Jacob and the land of their forefathers. This explains the lengthiness of Jacob's speech:

במערה אשר בשדה המכפלה אשר על פני ממרא בארץ כנען אשר קנה אברהם את השדה מאת עפרון החיתי לאחוזת קבר: ושמה קברו את אברהם ואת שרה אשתו ושמה קברו את יצחק ואת רבקה אשתו ושמה קברתי את לאה: מקנה השדה והמערה אשר בו מאת בני חת.

In the cave in the field of Machpela, which faces Mamre, in the Land of Canaan, the field which Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a burial plot; where Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, where Isaac and his wife Rebecca were buried, and where I buried Leah; the purchase of the

**Joseph's
Legacy –
Hope for
Redemption**

The second narrative is the burial of Joseph, which is left incomplete – Joseph does request to be buried in the Land of Israel, but not yet. He remains with the people in Egypt, and his request to be buried in Israel remains part of the process of redemption. When the people are redeemed, they will fulfill Joseph's command and take his bones to be buried in Israel.

Jacob's burial in Israel, and the promise to bury Joseph there as well, anchor the nation to the land and encourage them to return to Israel; they serve as a constant reminder of the promise that the redemption will come and they will return to the land.

field and the cave within it from the sons of Het. (Gen. 49:30-32)

The commentators wonder why Jacob chooses to list all of the people buried in the Cave of Machpela, and suggest a number of explanations.

However, according to the interpretation we have proposed, it is clear that Jacob seeks to strengthen his children's connection with the land of their forefathers. This is why he emphasizes that their entire family is buried in Canaan: their mother Leah, their grandfather Isaac and their great-grandfather Abraham. In this way, Jacob emphasizes that his descendants possess a natural familial connection to the Land of Canaan, and not to Egypt.

D. The Connection between Joseph's Nature and the Redemption

Joseph
Accompanies
the Nation
from Exile to
Redemption

As mentioned above, Joseph is the one who initiated the process of descent into Egypt, and he is the one who begins the redemption. Evidently, there is unique significance to Joseph's accompanying the nation during their exile and liberation.

What is unique about Joseph's character?

Two qualities are central to Joseph's nature. Both are invaluable to keep the nation alive during the exile and to prepare them for the redemption.

Dealing with
Difficulty

First, as we saw in *Parashat Vayeshev*, Joseph has a special talent for coping with difficult situations and emerging even stronger: he is sold as a slave in Egypt, and immediately attains a high position in Potiphar's house; he is thrown into prison, yet even there he manages to rise to a respectable status; he leaves the prison and becomes the king's second-in-command. His ability to handle difficulties and rise above them is vital for the nation's survival during the exile, and will allow them to emerge from the exile stronger than ever before.²⁴

²⁴ At the Covenant between the Parts, God tells Abraham that his descendants will be enslaved, but also promises him that they will emerge from slavery stronger than before: "...And after this they will leave with great possessions" (Gen. 15:13). While the simple understanding of the text interprets "great possessions" as referring to money, it can also be understood

Preserving
Identity

Another quality of Joseph's, which comes to light as he copes with his personal "exile" in Egypt, is his ability to preserve his identity, even in a foreign environment. Joseph lived in Egypt for many years, but never lost his sense of who he was. He did not hide his "Hebrew" origins and was not ashamed of them. He is called a "Hebrew" by Potiphar's wife,²⁵ and the head butler refers to him in this way when speaking to Pharaoh;²⁶ even when he becomes Pharaoh's second-in-command he maintains this part of his identity:

And they served him separately
and them separately, and the
Egyptians eating with him
separately, for the Egyptians
could not eat bread with
the Hebrews, for it is an
abomination to the Egyptians.
(Gen. 43:32)

וַיְשִׂימוּ לוֹ לְבַדּוֹ וְלָהֶם
לְבַדָּם וְלַמִּצְרַיִם
הָאֹכְלִים אִתּוֹ לְבַדָּם
כִּי לֹא יוֹכְלוּן הַמִּצְרַיִם
לֶאֱכֹל אֶת הָעֵבְרִים
לְחֶם כִּי תוֹעֵבָה הוּא
לַמִּצְרַיִם. (פרק מ"ג,
לב)

Even though maintaining his identity caused distance between Joseph and the Egyptians, he did not abandon it. This determination to keep his identity is

as a spiritual revival. This interpretation is presented by R. Moshe Alshich, *Torat Moshe* on Gen. 15:7-17; *Degel Machaneh Ephraim* on *Parashat Lekh Lekha*, s.v. "VaAvadum"; *Ma'or VeShemesh* on *Parashat Ki Tavo*, s.v. "ULeva'er" and additional Hasidic words.

²⁵ "See, he has brought a Hebrew man to make sport of us" (Gen. 39:14) and "The Hebrew slave you brought to us came to me to make sport of me" (Gen. 39:17).

²⁶ "And there, with us, was a Hebrew youth, a slave to the head of the butchers" (Gen. 41:12).

reflected not only in the fact Joseph is referred to as a “Hebrew,” but also in Joseph’s constant declarations that God is helping him.

Even during his conflict with Potiphar’s wife, Joseph clearly refuses to submit to the dominant Egyptian culture. He remains committed to the moral standards of his father’s house,²⁷ as the following *midrash* illustrates:

Rabbi Pinhas says: Divine inspiration and the spirit of wisdom were given to Joseph from his youth until the day of his death. And in everything he was led by wisdom, as a shepherd leads his flock; and with all his wisdom a woman led him astray, and when he prepared to perform a sin, he saw the image of his father, and reconsidered and conquered his evil inclination. (<i>Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer</i> [Heiger] ch. 38)	ר' פנחס אומר: שרתה רוח הקדש ורוח חכמה על יוסף מנעוריו ועד יום מותו. והייתה מנהגת אותו בכל דבר חכמה כרועה שהוא מנהיג את צאנו, ובכל חכמתו הטתו אשה, וכשבקש להרגיל עבירה ראה דיוקנו של אביו וחזר לאחריו וכבש את יצרו. (פרקי דרבי אליעזר [היגר], פרק ל"ח)
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27 The *midrash* praises Joseph’s efforts to preserve his identity, and contrasts it with that of Moses:

דבר אחר – אמר משה לפני הקב"ה: רבש"ע עצמותיו של יוסף נכנסין לארץ ואני איני נכנס? אמר לו הקב"ה מי שהודה בארצו, אדונתו אומרת לו "ראו הביא לנו איש עברי" ואינו כופר אלא אמר "כי גנב גנבתי מארץ העברים"; אתה שלא הודית בארצך, בנות יתרו אומרות "איש מצרי הצילנו" ואתה שומע ושותק, לפיכך אין אתה נקבר בארצך.

Another thing: Moses said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, shall Joseph’s bones enter the

**Joseph
as a Role
Model for
Coping
with Exile**

As the nation of Israel sinks into exile in Egypt, they need Joseph as a role model to accompany them throughout the exile and lead them through it safely, ensuring that they remain worthy of redemption and leave the exile stronger than before.

Joseph, who lived in exile himself for many years, is the role model for the nation in coping with the difficulties of exile.²⁸

Joseph, who endured many trials and rose above them, prepares the nation for exile and prophesizes that they will ultimately be redeemed when God comes to their aid. Joseph, who recognized God’s assistance all his life, is the one to remind the people

Land of Israel while I may not? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: [Joseph] declared his homeland, as his mistress said to him, “See, he has brought a Hebrew man,” and he did not deny it; rather, he said, “For I was surely stolen from the land of the Hebrews.” You did not declare your homeland, as the daughters of Jethro said, “An Egyptian man saved us,” and you heard and were silent – for this reason you shall not be buried in your land.

28 Joseph inherited these qualities from his mother, Rachel – she too accompanied the nation on their way to exile. Like her son, Rachel’s bones (and burial in Bethlehem on the way to Efrata) represent a unique hope and prayer stemming from the knowledge that God accompanies His children even in the most difficult times – the journey to exile:

רחל מבכה על בניה... פה אמר ה' מנעי קולך מפניך מדמעה פי יש שכר לפעלתך נאם ה' וישבו מארץ אויב. ויש תקנה לאחרייתך נאם ה' וישבו בנים לגבולם.

Rachel weeps for her children... So says God: “Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your actions will be rewarded,” says God, “and they shall return from the land of their enemies. And there is hope for your future,” says God, “and your children shall return to their borders.” (Jer. 31:14-16)

that God will liberate them and save them from Egypt. Joseph, who fought to keep his identity as a Hebrew even among the Egyptians, is the figure that stands before the nation during their difficult experiences in exile, as they descend through the forty-nine levels of impurity and nearly assimilate among the Egyptians, but still manage to preserve their identity. It is through this merit that they are ultimately redeemed:²⁹

Israel had three admirable	ג' מדות טובות שהיו
traits in Egypt, and merited	בידן של ישראל
redemption because of them:	במצרים ובזכותן
they did not change their	נגאלו: שלא שינו את
names, and did not change	שם, ולא שינו את
their language, and preserved	לשונם, ושגדרו עצמם
themselves from immorality.	מן הערוה. (במדבר
(<i>Bamidbar Rabba</i> 13:20)	רבה י"ג, כ)

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29 The principles described above provide a foundation for a great deal of the discussion of Joseph's character in Hasidic literature; see *Sefat Emet* on *Parashat Vayigash* 5645; *Pri Tzadik*, *Ki Tetze* 9; *Ohev Yisrael*, *Vayechi* s.v. "And he blessed Joseph," and others.