

VAYEHI: SELECTED SHORTS

Rabbi Eliot Malomet January 2, 2021 18 Tevet 5781

בראשית מ"ח:ט

(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אָבִיו בְּנֵי הֵם אֲשֶׁר-נָתַתְּ לִי אֱלֹהִים בְּנֵה...

Genesis 48:9

(9) And Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me in this..."

Note how Joseph refers to Egypt in private. Do we detect some disdain or contempt? The land of Egypt has given Joseph wealth and power. But it has also taken away his freedom, and Joseph knows it. And he knows that Jacob knows it too.

בראשית מ"ח:י

(י) וַיִּבְנֶי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּבָדוֹ מִדָּקוֹן לֹא יוּכַל לְרַאות וַיִּגַּשׁ אֹתָם אֲלָיו וַיִּשָּׂק לָהֶם וַיְחַבְּקוּ לָהֶם:

Genesis 48:10

(10) Now Israel's eyes were dim with age; he could not see. So [Joseph] brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them.

God bless the biblical narrator! In one sentence we have the memory of Isaac's blindness, the theft of the blessing, Jacob's original encounter with Rachel, Jacob's encounter with Esau, Joseph's encounter with his brothers all encoded in the word *vayaggesh* or its various forms. And he kisses his grandchildren, and then he hugs them. This is Ephraim and Manasseh's first encounter with their grandfather. We are there with them all in this wonderfully complicated moment. It can make you all *faklempf!*

בראשית מ"ח:טו-ט"ז

(טו) וַיְבָרֵךְ אֶת-יִסְחָר וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר הִתְהַלַּכְוּ אֲבוֹתַי ... הָאֱלֹהִים הִרְעִיה אֹתִי מֵעוֹדֵי עַד-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: (טז) הַמְלֵאךְ הַגָּאֹל אֹתִי מִכָּל-רָע וַיְבָרֵךְ אֶת-הַנְּעָרִים ...

Genesis 48:15-16

(15) And he blessed Joseph, saying, "The God in whose ways my fathers...walked, The God who has been my shepherd (16) The Angel who has redeemed me from all harm— Bless the lads..."

My fathers walked with God; God lead me. God's angel redeemed me. This is Jacob's theology. He understands that God's relationship is different with each of them. This is a very Jewish idea.

בראשית מ"ט:ל"ג

(לג) וַיִּכְלַ וַיַּעֲקֹב לְצַנֹּת אֶת-כַּבְּיָו וַיִּאֲסֹף רַגְלָיו אֶל-הַמַּטָּה וַיִּגָּע וַיִּאֲסֹף אֶל-עַמּוּיוֹ:

Genesis 49:33

(33) When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people.

בראשית מ"ז:כ"ט

(כט) אֶל-גָּא תִקְבְּרֵנִי בְּמִצְרָיִם:

Genesis 47:29

(29) ...please do not bury me in Egypt.

Why doesn't Jacob want to be buried in Egypt? He says he wants to be with his ancestors, but obviously there's more to this. To this day, a family tomb exerts a strong pull on us. By insisting on being buried with his ancestors, he intensifies the emotional pull of the land upon his descendants. Returning his bones to the promised land will diminish the geographical breach between the living and the dead.

בראשית מ"ז:ל"א

(לא) וַיֹּאמֶר הַשְּׂבָעָה לִי וַיִּשְׂבַּע לוֹ ...

Genesis 47:31

(31) And he said, "Swear to me." And he swore to him...

This is so characteristic of Jacob. He made Esau swear when he forsook his claim to the birthright for a bowl of red stew. There, he wanted a firm, incontrovertible, unassailable transaction. Here as well. Making his son swear means that he does not fully trust Joseph and locks him into an iron-clad agreement. Does Jacob have reason not to trust Joseph? Absolutely. He sees that Joseph is beholden to Pharaoh and that Joseph is conflicted in his personal and political interests. By making Joseph swear, Jacob places the personal above the political, and boxes Joseph in a corner when the time comes to repatriate his body to Canaan.

בראשית מ"ח:ב

(ב) ... וַיִּתְחַזֵּק יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשָּׁב עַל-הַמַּטָּה:

Genesis 48:2

(2)... Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed.

You have to admire a 147 year-old man who can get himself to sit up in his bed! But the Torah is also subtly reminding us that this was not a feeble man. This is a textual flashback to his journey to Haran, his incredible feats of strength unplugging wells, setting up stone monuments, raising flocks, fathering 13 children with 4 women, wrestling with assailants, and continuing to survive despite the heavy emotional toll of loss and intra-family conflict. He knows how to summon strength!

The word *vayechal* takes us back to Creation. When God completes Creation – as we recall in *kiddush* every Friday night. Here not only is Jacob's life reaching its end, but the foundational story of Jewish peoplehood is also coming to its conclusion.

בראשית נ"ה:

(ה) אָבִי הַשְּׁבִיעִי לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי מֵת בְּקִבְרֵי אֲשֶׁר פָּרִיתִי לִי בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן כְּנָעַן שָׁמָּה תִקְבְּרֵנִי וְעִמָּה אֶעֱלֶה-גַּא וְאֶקְבְּרָה אֶת-אָבִי וְאֶשׁוּבָה:

### Genesis 50:5

(5) *'My father made me swear, saying, "I am about to die. Be sure to bury me in the grave which I made ready for myself in the land of Canaan." Now, therefore, let me go up and bury my father; then I shall return.'*

Put this statement under a magnifying glass. Jacob's verbatim request was "please don't bury me in Egypt." Joseph changes the quote. Why? Because Joseph does not want to insult Pharaoh. Jacob's request is derogatory toward Egypt. But again, we see that Joseph remains continually subservient and servile to Pharaoh. He has no autonomy. He just can't come and go as he pleases. Even for a family funeral! Joseph respects Pharaoh, but he fears him as well.

בראשית נ"ו-ז:

(ו) וַיֹּאמֶר פְּרֹעֶה עֲלֶה וְקַבֵּר אֶת-אָבִיךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר הִשְׁבִּיעֶךָ: (ז) וַיַּעַל יוֹסֵף לְקַבֵּר אֶת-אָבִיו וַיֵּעֲלוּ אִתּוֹ כָּל-עַבְדֵי פְרֹעֶה וְכָל זִקְנֵי בְיָתוֹ וְכָל זִקְנֵי אֶרֶץ-מִצְרָיִם:

### Genesis 50:6-7

(6) *And Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you promise on oath." (7) So Joseph went up to bury his father; and with him went up all the officials of Pharaoh, the senior members of his court, and all of Egypt's dignitaries...*

No, "I'm sorry for your loss," here. Not even a card or a donation to Joseph's shul! With Pharaoh it's all business. Pharaoh notes that Joseph actually had to make an oath to his father about this! Conclusion: Jacob didn't trust Pharaoh either. And so, why the entourage of notable Egyptians, the equivalent of the entire cabinet, congress, and the Supreme Court? (Why doesn't he himself go with him?) This is to make sure that Joseph will come back to Egypt. Oh, and the fact that the women and children have also stayed behind is another guaranty. Is Pharaoh benevolent? On the contrary. He's been cold, calculating and very shrewd throughout the entire story. And Joseph is locked. He has no freedom.

בראשית נ"ז-כ"ו

(כה) וַיִּשְׁבַּע יוֹסֵף אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פֶּלֶד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹקִים אֶתְכֶם וְהֵעֵלְתֶם אֶת-עַצְמוֹתַי מִזֶּה:

### Genesis 50:25-26

(25) *So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from this."*

Pardon the punctiliousness here but why is it that whenever Joseph is in private he refers to Egypt as "this"? (see above) Because **this** place is complicated. **This** place is messy. **This** place has provided sustenance but has also caused dislocation. **This** place ruptures connectedness to the land and to the shepherding tradition of our ancestors. **This** place is organized around agriculture and the power of the state not tribal interdependence. **This** place venerates an all-powerful Pharaoh and not an all-powerful God. **This** place monumentalizes death and an afterlife and can't even come close to imagining a covenantal relationship with the living God.

(כו) וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף בְּן-מֵאָה וָעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנִים וַיַּחַנְטוּ אֹתוֹ בְּיִשָּׁם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:

(26) *Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt. And thus the book ends. HAZAK! We start with the universe and end in a box. We start out with endless human potential, and end with the precursor to enslavement. Genesis begins with a life-giving breath and ends with a life-ending exhalation. Why 110 years for Joseph? To ancient Egyptians that's the ideal lifespan. For us, it's 120. The rabbis explained that Joseph's life was reduced 10 years because of his haughtiness. When Judah begged Joseph to spare Benjamin, he kept referring to Jacob as "my father, your servant." Joseph didn't admonish him with a "don't talk about your father that way. He is your father." Another explanation: if 110 was indeed a recognizably symbolic ideal age for Egyptians then the subtext is clear: Joseph may have been born a Hebrew, but he died as an Egyptian. Publicly he served Egypt; privately he had contempt for it. Publicly he had wealth, power and prestige. Privately, he had bewilderment, sorrow, and self-doubt. Publicly, he was Pharaoh's right-hand man; privately he couldn't move without Pharaoh's permission. Publicly he was an Egyptian prince; privately he was the first Hebrew slave. The oath to repatriate his bones is in the end a repudiation of his life. Shabbat Shalom!*