

**Vayehi: The Meaning of Jacob's Burial Request**  
**Rabbi Eliot Malomet January 3, 2026 14 Tevet 5786**

One of our congregants, may his soul dwell in a bright Eden, had an unusual request. "When I die, Rabbi, I want that you should cremate my body and take my ashes to Auschwitz and sprinkle them there." I told him that Jewish law prohibits this, and therefore I could not honor his request, and besides, the thought of concealing a container of his remains in a suitcase on a flight to Warsaw and then travel to Auschwitz with it in my backpack, and sneak away from the tour group to go to some corner and pour them out there, was, well, not something that I was going to spend a lot of time thinking about. Regardless, I took his request seriously and we talked about it often. While he himself was not a survivor, he evidently wanted the destiny of his body to be linked with the million Jews whose ashes are indeed located there in the various ponds, pits, and fields in and around the vast complex. **That request said a lot about**

**who he was and how he saw himself.** When he died, I officiated at his funeral and buried him not in Poland, but here, in New Jersey. It's been many years, but the story has stayed with me. **Our wishes about what is to be done with our bodies after our deaths reflects our most important concerns during our lives.** That is how we can frame Jacob's final requests in this, the final parasha of Bereishit. Jacob first makes Joseph swear that he will bury him in the land of Canaan. Jacob reiterates this request to all of his sons on his deathbed - more precisely, he **COMMANDS THEM** to do so - just before he took his last breath. But to examine these requests properly, we have to line them up with all of the other patriarchal and matriarchal burials that take place in Genesis. Here we go. (The verses that make specific reference to the deaths and burials in the book of Bereishit are below this chart).

WHO BURIED WHOM	WITH WHOM	WHERE?
Abraham buried Sarah. (23:19)	By himself.	in the cave of the field of Makhpela, facing Mamre—; that is Hevron, in the land of Canaan.
Isaac and Ishmael bury Isaac. (25:9)	Together.	in the cave of Makhpela, in the field of Efron son of Tzohar the Hittite, that faces Mamre. the field that Abraham had acquired from the Sons of Het. There were buried Abraham and Sara his wife
Devora is buried. (35:8)	By unnamed persons.	She was buried below Bet-El, beneath the oak, so they called its name: Allon Bakhut/Oak of Weeping.
Rachel is buried. (35:19)	By Jacob? Unclear here.	She was buried along the way to Efrat—that is Bet-Lehem.
Jacob buries Rachel. (48:7)	By himself.	On the way, with still a stretch of land left to come to Efrat. There I buried her, on the way to Efrat—that is now Bet-Lehem.
Esau and Jacob bury Isaac. (35:29)	Together.	No specific mention of place. We assume it is Makhpela.

**VERSES ABOUT BURIAL IN BEREISHIT**

ואחריו בן קבר אברהם את שרה אשתו אל מערת שדה המקפלה על פני ממרא הוא חברון בארץ כנען.
Afterward Abraham <b>buried</b> Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Makhpela, facing Mamre that is Hevron, in the land of Canaan.
ויקברו אותו יצחק וישמעאל בניו אל מערת המקפלה אל שדה עפרון בן צמר החתי אשר על פני ממרא.
Isaac and Ishmael his sons <b>buried</b> him, in the cave of Makhpela, in the field of Efron son of Tzohar the Hittite, that faces Mamre.
ותמת דברה מינקת רבקה ותקבר מתחת לבית אל פחת האלון ויקרא שמו אלון בכות.
Devora, Rebekah's nurse, died. She was <b>buried</b> below Bet-El, beneath the oak, so they called its name: Allon Bakhut (Oak of Weeping)
ותמת רחל ותקבר בדרך אפרתה הוא בית לחם.
So Rachel died; she was <b>buried</b> along the way to Efrat that is Bet-Lehem.
ואני בבאי מפדן מתה עלי רחל בארץ כנען בדרך בעוד כפרת ארץ לבא אפרתה ותקברה שם בדרך אפרתה הוא בית לחם.
While I— when I came back from Paddan, Rahel died on me, in the land of Canaan, on the way, with still a stretch of land left to come to Efrat. There I <b>buried</b> her, on the way to Efrat—that is now Bet-Lehem.
ויגוע יצחק וימת ויאסף אל עמיו זקן ושובע ימים ויקברו אותו עשו ויעקב בניו.
Then Isaac expired. He died and was gathered to his kinspeople, old and satisfied in days. Esau and Jacob his sons buried him.

Devora (Rebekah's wetnurse) is the only one who does not have specifically named individuals who bury her. **With everyone else we know who buries them and where they are buried.** With that in mind let us examine Jacob's request / commandment for his own burial.

**Jacob's Burial Request of Joseph - Gen. 47:29-31**

ויקרבני ימי ישראל למות ויקרא לבנו ליוסף ויאמר לו אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך שים נא ידך תחת ירכי ועשית עמדי חסד ואמת אל נא תקברני במצרים. ושכבתי עם אבותי ונשאמני ממצרים וקברתם בקברתם ויאמר אנכי אעשה כדברך. השבעה לי וישבע לו וישתחו ישראל על ראש המטה.

Israel's days drew near to death, so he called his son Joseph and said to him: Pray, if I have found favor in your eyes, pray put your hand under my thigh— deal with me in loyalty and faithfulness: pray do not bury me in Egypt! [When] I lie down with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt, and **bury me in their burial site!** He said: I will do according to your words. But he said: Swear to me! So he swore to him. Then Israel bowed, at the head of the bed.

**Who is to bury Jacob?** According to this, Jacob is designating Joseph to be the one to bury him. Does this mean that he wants Joseph to bury him by himself? Probably not. Most likely it means that he wants Joseph to be the one in charge of the whole operation.

**Where does Jacob want to be buried?** Jacob does not specify the burial place by name. He refers to it by who is buried there: his fathers.<sup>1</sup>

#### Jacob's Commandment to His Sons - Gen. 49:29-32

וַיְצַו אוֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אֲנִי נֹאסֵף אֶל עַמִּי קְבְּרוּ אֹתִי אֶל אֲבֹתֵי אִלְמְעָרָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשֵׂדָה עֶפְרוֹן הַחִתִּי. בַּמְעָרָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשֵׂדָה הַמַּכְפֵּלָה אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי מַמְרֵא בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר קָנָה אֲבֹרָהָם אֶת הַשְּׂדֵה מֵאֵת עֶפְרוֹן הַחִתִּי לְאַחֲזֹת קֶבֶר. שָׁמָּה קְבְּרוּ אֶת אֲבֹרָהָם וְאֶת שְׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ שָׁמָּה קְבְּרוּ אֶת יִצְחָק וְאֶת רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ וְשָׁמָּה קְבַרְתִּי אֶת לֵאָה. מִקְנָה הַשְּׂדֵה וְהַמְעָרָה אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ מֵאֵת בְּנֵי חֵת.

*And he commanded them, saying to them: I am now about to be gathered to my people; **bury me** by my fathers, in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, at the cave that is in the field of Makhpela, that faces Mamre, in the land of Canaan. —Abraham had acquired that field from Ephron the Hittite, as a burial holding. There they buried Abraham and Sara his wife, there they buried Isaac and Rivkah his wife, there I buried Leah— an acquisition, the field and the cave that is in it, from the Sons of Het. Jacob had finished charging his sons; then he gathered up his feet onto the bed and expired, and was gathered to his kinspeople.*

**Who is to bury Jacob?** According to this, Jacob wants all the brothers to bury him together. **Where does Jacob want to be buried?** Jacob specifies the name and the history of the place in detail. But his rendition is slightly different from the way the deaths and burials were recounted earlier in the Torah when they took place.

Jacob's Version	Is that what the text says?
<i>There they buried Abraham and Sara his wife.</i>	Well, not exactly. Abraham buried Sarah alone. Isaac and Ishmael buried Abraham.
<i>There they buried Isaac and Rivkah his wife.</i>	Well, not exactly. This is awkward. Unless Jacob is speaking about himself in the third person. He should have said something like: <b>we</b> (Esau and I) buried my father and mother. And: the Torah never tells us about Rivkah's death and burial.

REMEMBERING RAN GVILI.  
THE LAST HOSTAGE.  
MAY HIS BODY BE RETURNED.

<i>There I buried Leah.</i>	Well, not exactly. The Torah never tells us about Leah's death and burial either.
-----------------------------	---

**Connection, Continuity and Cohesion.** Jacob's burial requests reveal three things that are crucial to him.

**1. Connection to the land.** Here is a man who has spent significant periods of his life outside the land of Canaan. He ran away to Padan Aram and created his family there. He returned to Canaan thinking he would stay but ended up going to Egypt and living the last seventeen years of his life there at the behest of Joseph. Burial in Canaan is Jacob's way of demonstrating his eternal connection to the land that his descendants will inherit.

**2. Continuity with his fathers.** He states this explicitly to Joseph and to all the brothers. He wants to be with his fathers. Period. Note that he could have asked to be buried with Rachel. But he doesn't. Being buried with his father and grandfather overrides being buried with his beloved wife, and because she remains in her burial site alone, she will become an even more important symbol of longing and loneliness especially to Jeremiah. By being buried with Leah Jacob demonstrates his solidarity with what will end up being the majority of the nation.

**3. The Cohesion of the Family after his Death.** This is perhaps his most important concern. *This is the last thing he thinks about on his deathbed! Isaac and Ishmael, they buried Abraham! Jacob and Esau, they buried Isaac! In both of those cases estranged brothers came together - repeat - **THEY CAME TOGETHER!** - to bury their one and only fathers!* In commanding all of his sons to bury him in Canaan, **TOGETHER**, he is not only commanding them to link his eternal remains with the covenantal land and with his covenantal fathers, *but he is commanding them to stay together, in this final moment, and to be a cohesive, covenantal people!* His burial will be his final opportunity to enable his fractious and fragmented family **to come together**. In this way, his burial wish is definitive of his most important desire: that his family be one. What could be more important as his legacy?<sup>2</sup>

## SHABBAT SHALOM!

<sup>1</sup> He states his request in two parallel lines that are in essence, two parallel "one-two": punches:

(A) אל נא תקברני במצרים	(B) ושקבתי עם אבותי
(A') ונשאאתני ממצרים	(B') וקברתני בקברתם
(A) Do not, pray, bury me in Egypt.	(B) I will lie down <b>with my fathers</b> .
(A') You shall carry me out of Egypt.	(B') You will bury me <b>in their burial-site</b> .

Clearly he wants to be buried with his fathers.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph has a similar request: **bring my bones up from here** (50:25). He never specifies where he wants to be buried. Why does he ask for that pledge? Because by the end of his life he understood that Israel

would remain in Egypt perhaps for a long time. He knew that he, more than anyone else was responsible for bringing them there. By insisting that his bones be taken out of there, he, like his father before him, was trying to correct his legacy. Repatriating his bones to Israel will symbolize his rejection of Egypt. **Joseph's entombment in Israel will be an atonement for Israel's entrenchment in Egypt.**

*וְאֵת עֲצָמוֹת יוֹסֵף אֲשֶׁר הָעִלּוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם קְבְּרוּ בְּשָׂכֶם בְּהִלְקַת הַשְּׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר קָנָה יַעֲקֹב מֵאֵת בְּנֵי חָמוֹר אָבִי שָׂכֶם בְּמֵאָה קֶשִׁיטָה וַיְהִי לְבְנֵי יוֹסֵף לְנִחְלָה*  
*The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the piece of ground that Jacob had bought for a hundred kesitahs from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, and which had become a heritage of the Josephites* (Josh. 24:32).