

Drash Parsha Va-y'hi

This parsha, Vayechi, the concluding parsha of B'reishit, brings to a conclusion the lives of Jacob and of Joseph, and the larger story of the patriarchs. It vibrates with portents of the future: the fate of each of the tribes in the (decidedly mixed) blessings Jacob bestows on his sons, the blessings of Ephraim and Manasseh, recalling Jacob's own stolen blessing. But I want to focus on burying one's parents, one of the hardest things we are ever called on to do.

My father (zichhrono livrakha) was fortunate. Relatively healthy until a few months before he died at 90, he had delayed settling on a burial plot. Finally at 89, during one of my visits, he decided it was time. Rejecting the run-down cemetery of Washington Hebrew Congregation, where they were members, my parents found instead a nearby suburban cemetery with a Jewish section, graced with trees, lovely hillsides, pretty headstones. He and my mother chose a plot, selected a headstone, and sat down to sign the hefty contract with the very decorous, careful young woman who was handling the sale. Just as he was about to sign, however, my father suddenly stopped, pen in hand: "Wait a minute! I have a question!" The young woman visibly wilted. "What happens if I don't die!"

This parsha is bookended by two sets of instructions to children about how to bury their parents, Jacob's instruction to Joseph that his body not be buried in Egypt but taken up to the cave of Machpelah to join those of his ancestors in Canaan, and Joseph's instruction to his brothers that his bones be taken back to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

As is often the case throughout the Torah, there are many repetitions, underlining the importance of what is happening and enriching meaning with slight variations [see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*]:

Jacob's instructions about where he is to be buried are given first to Joseph, then to all his sons together, and then repeated again when Joseph asks Pharaoh's permission to fulfill his father's request.

Many commentators, such as Nehama Liebowitz, have analyzed the exact words used in these three requests:

The disparaging language about Egypt found only in Jacob's request to Joseph:

“Please do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my fathers, take me from Egypt and bury me in their burial place.” [Ch. 47, v. 29-30]

To the all the sons, the “twelve tribes” of Israel, an elaborate description which Robert Alter points out follows traditional legal formulas for sale of land, perhaps the only way to prove ownership:

“Bury me with my fathers in the cave which is in the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre, in the land of Canaan, the field that I bought from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site—there Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah—the field and the cave in it, bought from the Hittites.” [Ch. 49, v. 29-30]

And then Joseph's request on Jacob's behalf, relayed through a courtier to Pharaoh:

“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.’” [Ch. 50, v. 5]

But I want to focus today on a small part of these requests: the emotional tone of the request: pleading, asking, instructing, or demanding. How do parents ask—or command—their children to carry out their wishes after they die? And how is it to be the child who is beseeched, commanded, or asked to swear?

The first request, Jacob directly to Joseph, is in a beseeching tone (perhaps fitting the high status that Joseph, even though he is a son, has attained): In Alter's translation, "If, pray, I have found favor in your eyes, put your hand, pray, under my thigh, and act toward me with steadfast kindness, pray, do not bury me in Egypt...." But when Joseph assents, Jacob insists, "Swear to me."

The second request, to all Jacob's sons together, is really a demand. Again, in Alter's translation, "And he charged them and said to them, 'I am about to be gathered to my kinfolk. Bury me....'" or in *Etz Hayim*, "Then he instructed them, saying to them...."

And then in his request to Pharaoh, Joseph uses the words "My father made me swear, saying, look, I am about to die, in the grave I readied me in the land of Canaan, there you must bury me." So here a sworn oath means that Joseph "must" do what his father asked.

I think it's easier when God is running everything. Then you can't do the wrong thing—you can't give the blessing to the older child if God has designated the younger one—and even when you betray your parent, as Joseph's brothers horribly betrayed their own father, selling Joseph into captivity and then lying about his fate—it turns out, as Joseph says, to have been for the good.

But how do we, as mere mortals, deal with our obligations to our parents, and of course, those obligations we might wish to impose on our children—actual or spiritual. When do we have to find our own way, versus when can we try to fulfill what our parents asked of us? How is the life we seek for our children really out of our hands? In this era, can any of us imagine making our children swear on our deathbeds to fulfill our wishes?

The usual way to end such a drash is to say that we honor our ancestors, our fathers and mothers, by carrying forward the tradition we inherited, by building a shul that is home to a vibrant Jewish community, by carrying our tradition forward. We have done this. But I think it's a lot harder than that.

Will my children be able to carry out my wishes, for myself, or for them? Is it right to ask them? Could I ask them to carry out my living will, to end my life under the circumstances I choose? Could I make them swear to carry out my wishes? As I go through the few possessions I've kept from my own parents, my grandmother's tiny, thin broken wedding ring that my mother carefully saved, my father's WWII lieutenant's bars or his Phi Beta Kappa pin, can I ask my children to treasure these treasures because they meant so much to my parents, whom they knew only when they were small? Unlike Jacob, who suffered but who in the end could know that, as Israel, the patriarch of the entire people and all that was to come, he was doing the right thing, I don't think it can be so easy for us.

Shabbat Shalom